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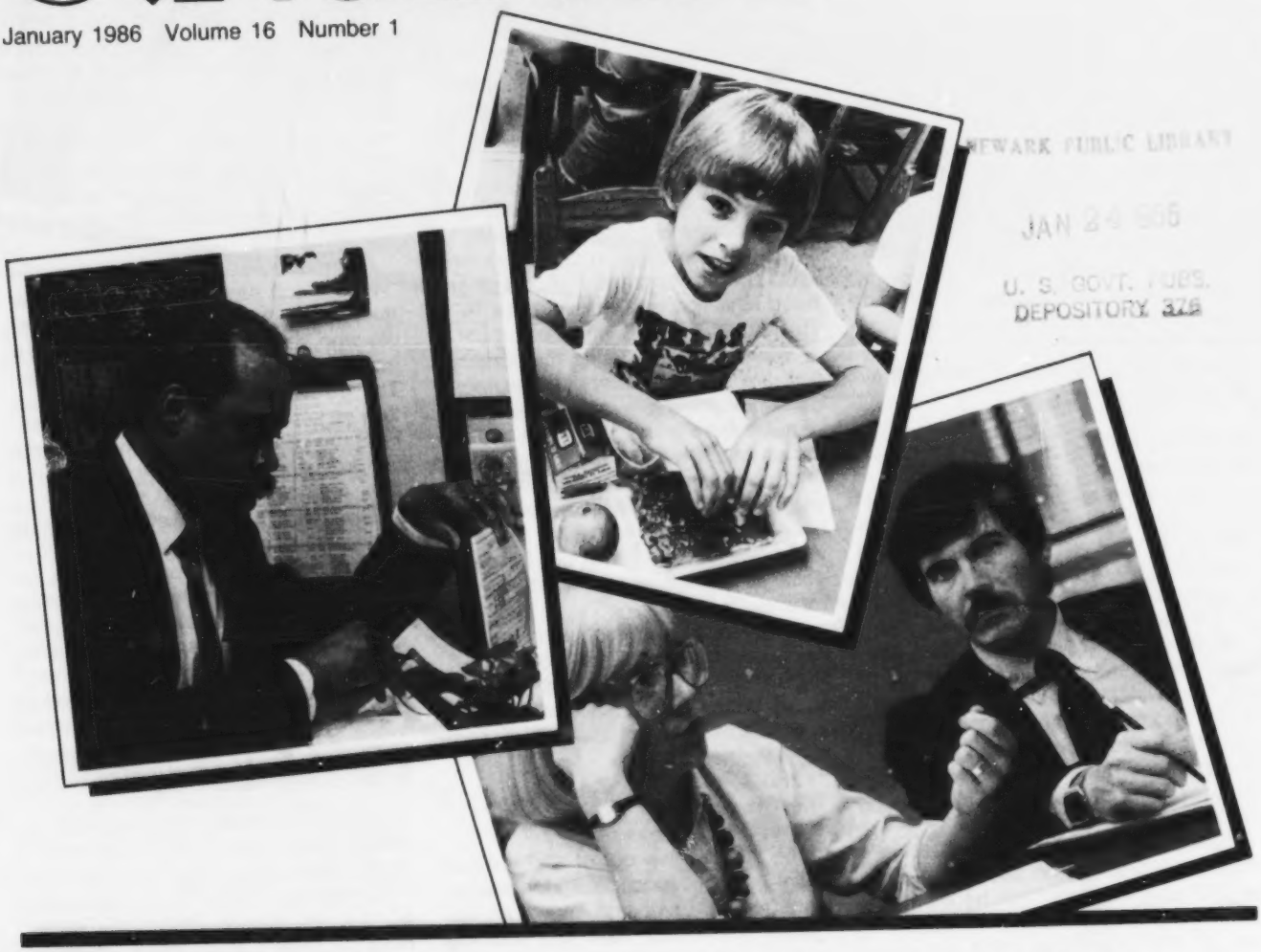

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This issue focuses on improving communications among federal, state, and local food program managers. • Examples from around the country illustrate special projects or efforts that: • build new lines of communication among people working on similar problems; • help people share ideas, expertise, and technical know-how; • and improve service to food program participants by making information more readily available.

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Teamwork Gets Results For Food Stamp Managers

Team problem solving is what a new state self-help effort in the Food Stamp Program is all about. Initiated and supported by the Food and Nutrition Service, the effort enables the most talented federal, state, and local food stamp managers to work together in helping food stamp agencies that have high error rates or other problems in managing their programs.

"It's the best example I know of a federal-state partnership," says Virgil Conrad, deputy administrator for family nutrition programs at FNS. "Although it doesn't cost a lot of money, we're harnessing knowledge so that people don't have to re-invent the wheel to do a better job. What better way to help a state than to get people who are executing the job well in another state to become the teachers."

Every region is involved

Each of the seven FNS regional offices has organized a technical assistance team that will provide help where needed. Two of the regions are sharing a team, so there are six in all.

The teams consist of regional, state, and local experts, including state and local prosecutors and investigators, staff from state Inspector General offices, and claims collections specialists. States contribute the time and skills of their people, and FNS contributes funds for traveling as well as overall direction.

Reaction to the teams has been enthusiastic. "Part of the success of the effort," says Conrad, "can be measured in the commitment of the states to put up team members. Here are state people willing not only to improve their own programs, but to help others in managing theirs."

One of the teams' main concerns is helping states cut down on errors made in certifying applicants and in determining recipients' benefit levels. Bringing down high error rates is a priority for many states, since they face potential sanctions from FNS for levels that exceed national limits. The teams are also helping states improve methods for prosecuting fraud and collecting claims for overpayments made to recipients.

"Nationally, we've seen a lot of progress in making the Food Stamp Program more accountable," says Conrad. "National error rates are coming down. There are more fraud investigations than ever before. And tougher penalties for violators mean recipients can lose access to their benefits if they defraud the program.

"But states have had varying degrees of success with bringing down their error rates and fighting fraud. We encourage states to go after fraud by giving them enhanced funding for anti-fraud activities. Usually, the federal government pays for half of states' administrative costs in operating the Food Stamp Program. For certain anti-fraud activities, we increase this to 75 percent.

"States who are using this funding well are seeing tremendous savings. By successfully preventing fraudulent benefits from going out, some are saving as much as $70 for each dollar in enhanced funding they receive from us. Other states, however, are not even preventing a full dollar in fraudulent benefits from going out for each dollar in enhanced funding they receive."

Many states with high error rates have asked for guidance from FNS. Providing this guidance and helping states better use the enhanced funding is what the technical assistance teams are designed to do.

Effort is part of Operation Awareness

The teams grow out of and are part of FNS' highly successful food stamp management campaign known as Operation Awareness. Now just finishing its third year, Operation Awareness has encouraged state managers to share skills and problem-solving techniques through conferences, newsletters, catalogues of state and local anti-fraud efforts, and other activities.

Through the State Exchange Program, an important part of Operation Awareness, FNS has paid for food stamp managers to travel to other states and regions to view successful management techniques.

The technical assistance teams add a new dimension to the state exchange concept. "You now have a pool of knowledge from several states organized and available to everyone," Conrad says. He sees the teams working as a communications clearinghouse that enables the federal government to carry out technical assistance in a very cost-effective, practical way.

Conrad and other food stamp managers at FNS had considered the idea of hiring a national consultant to travel around the country and offer assistance. They rejected this idea because the services of such a specialist would be expensive and because there might be resistance from states to a high-level outsider coming in to address their problems.

Conrad is pleased with this decision. "We couldn't have done better on the market," he says. "The teams are people who have learned by the school of hard knocks how to solve problems. They're academically prepared, but they've also learned from experience. FNS regional staff have done an excellent job of marshalling the talent within their regions."

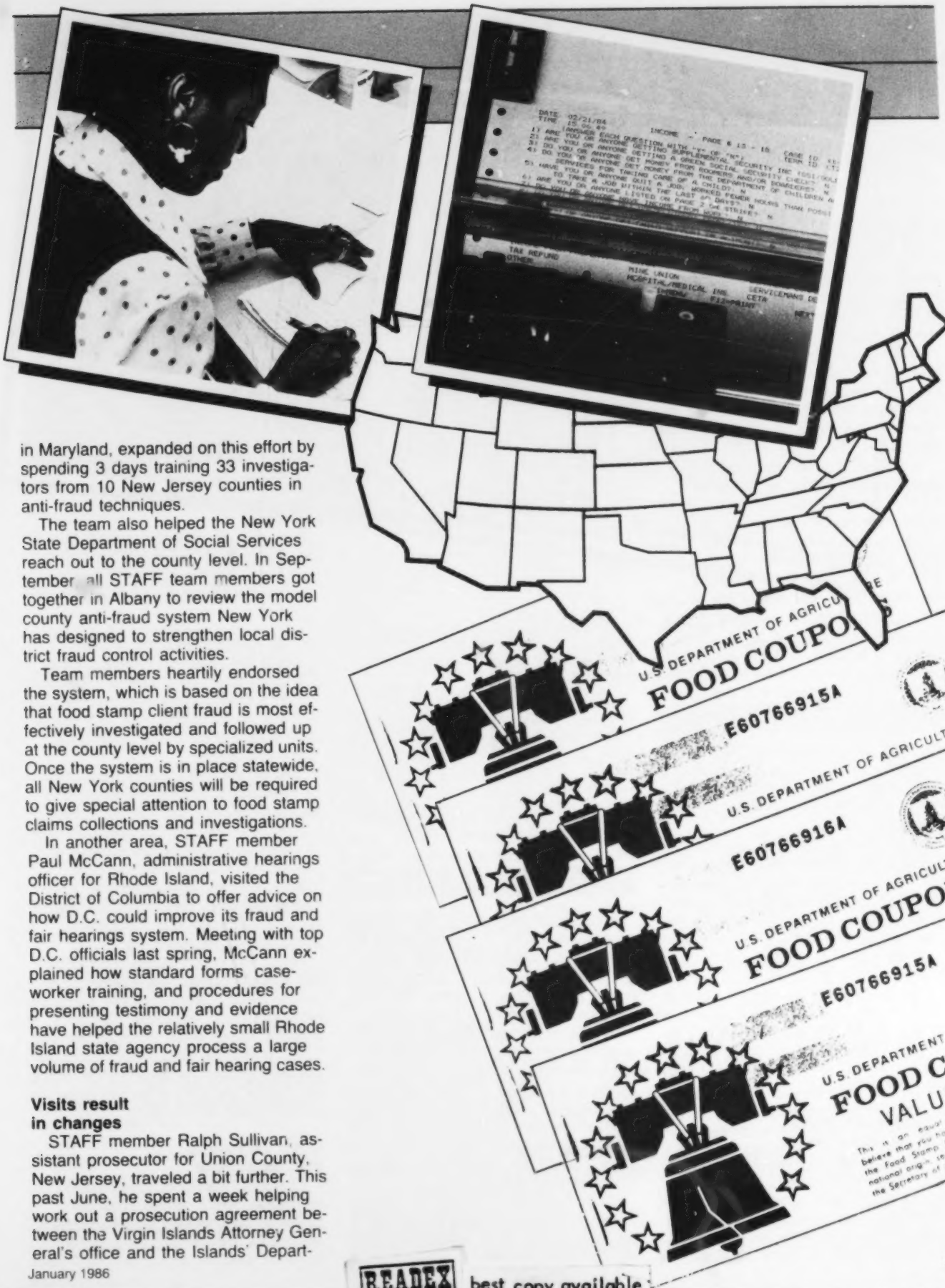
The teams have achieved some dramatic results in the year and a half since they were set up. Each FNS regional office had the flexibility to set up its technical assistance team in its own way, so every team is somewhat different. The following highlights illustrate how the teams work and what kind of results they're getting in various areas:

Mid-Atlantic and Northeast

FNS' Mid-Atlantic and Northeast regional offices have joined forces with a single team made up of experts from both regions. The team is called STAFF, for Special Technical Assistance for Anti-Fraud Funding. STAFF activities have generated a good deal of publicity and interest in both regions, and a number of state agencies have made some changes in their operations as a result of the team's work.

For example, at the encouragement of the team, last February local food stamp staff from Mercer County, New Jersey, visited Camden County's Special Investigations Unit, which prevents certification of ineligible applicants for food stamps and AFDC (Aid to Families with Dependent Children). Mercer County staff were so impressed with the unit, they set up a similar operation themselves within a few months.

STAFF member John Murray, assistant director of special investigations



in Maryland, expanded on this effort by spending 3 days training 33 investigators from 10 New Jersey counties in anti-fraud techniques.

The team also helped the New York State Department of Social Services reach out to the county level. In September, all STAFF team members got together in Albany to review the model county anti-fraud system New York has designed to strengthen local district fraud control activities.

Team members heartily endorsed the system, which is based on the idea that food stamp client fraud is most effectively investigated and followed up at the county level by specialized units. Once the system is in place statewide, all New York counties will be required to give special attention to food stamp claims collections and investigations.

In another area, STAFF member Paul McCann, administrative hearings officer for Rhode Island, visited the District of Columbia to offer advice on how D.C. could improve its fraud and fair hearings system. Meeting with top D.C. officials last spring, McCann explained how standard forms caseworker training, and procedures for presenting testimony and evidence have helped the relatively small Rhode Island state agency process a large volume of fraud and fair hearing cases.

Visits result in changes

STAFF member Ralph Sullivan, assistant prosecutor for Union County, New Jersey, traveled a bit further. This past June, he spent a week helping work out a prosecution agreement between the Virgin Islands Attorney General's office and the Islands' Depart-

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The first meeting organized by the STAFF team in October 1984 resulted in a number of recommendations for states having problems with their anti-fraud efforts.

ment of Social Welfare.

Sullivan was sent to the Virgin Islands because the Department of Social Welfare was having difficulty qualifying for enhanced funding from FNS. They had been unable to get the required prosecution agreement with their Attorney General's office specifying exactly what the responsibilities of each office would be in prosecuting welfare fraud cases.

The previous year the Attorney General's office had not prosecuted any cases of welfare fraud, even though the Department of Social Welfare had identified hundreds of cases of potential fraud.

Armed with travel arrangements and appointments set up by regional STAFF members, and a sample prosecution agreement hammered out ahead of time with regional food stamp staffer Leonard Klepner, Sullivan met with officials of the Virgin Islands Departments of Law and Social Welfare.

"I explained to the Attorney General's office how my unit up in Union County is funded, and the various expenses that are paid by FNS," Sullivan says. "And I explained that the funding would not only benefit the Department of Social Welfare, but also would cover some of the expenses of the Attorney General's office for the prosecution of fraud cases. I don't think they were aware of the extent of funding that was available."

By the end of the week, Sullivan had gotten a commitment from the Attorney General's office to become more involved in investigating and prosecuting welfare fraud. "I think we accomplished a lot while I was down there," he says.

He was pleased to see follow-up articles in the Virgin Islands press about a new crackdown on welfare fraud by the Attorney General's office. The draft agreement he worked out during the visit was later finalized, and the Virgin Islands is now getting enhanced funding from FNS.

Arrangement works well for everyone

John Sullivan of FNS' Mid-Atlantic regional office is STAFF coordinator for his region and handles the details of many of the team's efforts. "At the regional office we work out the funding, the liaison work, and the publicity," he says. "The state and local team members actually go and supervise the technical assistance."

The arrangement, he says, works well. "When you set out to give technical assistance, you get asked for direct information. The state and local people have it. The people we're helping would rather talk to a county or state person than a federal person, because they have the same problems."

Southeast

FNS' Southeast region has focused on demonstrating innovative ideas in its technical assistance effort. Many of the states in the region are following up on advice they've gotten from their neighbors through the team's work.

In one exchange between Southeastern states, technical assistance team member Ed Pledger, deputy director of the Office of Fraud and Abuse with Georgia's Department of Human Resources, told a representative from North Carolina how Georgia intercepts state income tax refunds to repay outstanding food stamp claims.

North Carolina's Division of Social Services is now working on getting a bill through the state legislature which would allow the state to set up a similar tax intercept system in 1987.

State managers in Florida, South Carolina, and Tennessee are following up on a claims collection system they learned about during trips to Kentucky set up by the technical assistance team last spring.

During the visits, Larry Hood, head of Kentucky's special collection unit, told representatives from the three states how his staff pursues collection of delinquent and hard-to-collect food stamp, AFDC, and child support claims. He also explained how Kentucky uses a private collection agency to go after debts that the state is unsuccessful in collecting.

All three visiting states plan to explore similar ideas. As a result of recommendations from regional and state resource team members, Kentucky plans to make some changes as well. To increase the amount of claims being established, the state will be setting up specialized claims worker positions in more than 60 counties.

Other exchanges also successful

Florida's "front-end" investigation technique, which allows suspicious cases to be checked for fraud before applicants are certified for program benefits, was the focus of a visit from

Pictured here are: Linda Green (left) and Linda von Voss-Beal (above) of FNS; Paul McCann of Rhode Island (center); and John Murray of Maryland (far right.)

representatives from Mississippi and Alabama. Regional resource team members suggested the visit because managers from the two states had been reluctant to try a similar system developed in California.

"We told them that Florida had picked up on this technique and was getting some very good results. We suggested they go over and take a look at it, and they agreed to do that," says Al Boutin, a food stamp supervisor with FNS' Southeast regional office.

Boutin coordinated a time in June for the two states to go to Florida, and funded the trip through the State Exchange Program. Bill Davis, director of the Division of Public Assistance Fraud in Florida's Auditor General's office, gave them a warm welcome.

He spent half a day explaining Florida's Fraud Investigator's Prevention Project (FIPP), under which eligibility workers refer suspicious cases to state investigators assigned to their certification office.

According to Davis, FIPP ran as a pilot project for 6 months last year in one food stamp office in each of four Florida districts. Each district was assigned an investigator, whose salary qualified for 75 percent enhanced funding from FNS.

During the 6 months, a total of 252 cases were referred to the investigators. Of these, 116 were approved, 26 were approved with benefit reduction, 98 were denied, and 11 people withdrew their applications after being confronted with the information found in the investigation. The total savings in actual outflow of food stamps amounted to nearly $76,000.

Mississippi and Alabama representatives were impressed with the Florida project. Mississippi took immediate action, making the program an option available to counties in the state the following month. Now more than 50 of the 82 counties in Mississippi have access to investigative workers. Alabama plans to set up a similar system in the near future.

"We should share with each other"

Bill Davis enjoyed sharing his success with neighboring states. "If we can help somebody else, we certainly want to do it. We should share with each other," he says.

He is not surprised that the technical assistance team idea works. "I've been on both sides of the fence, and I've found that people in states will tend to listen to somebody in another state quicker than they will someone from the regional office," he says. "Now, I don't know why, but that's just the way it goes!"

Midwest

The Midwest technical assistance team includes staff from FNS' regional and field offices, regional staff from the U.S. Inspector General's office, and the Secret Service. State and county staff contribute expertise on a case-by-case basis, as do representatives from FNS' Washington office.

Team efforts got underway late in 1984 when members met with a newly formed state unit in Ohio developed to investigate food stamp fraud and trafficking. The team provided information on procedures for coordinating and reporting on investigations between state and federal agencies, as well as training on the investigative process.

"Since they were brand new to the game, they were open to all kinds of suggestions about what was needed," says Liza Cowden, a food stamp specialist with FNS' Midwest regional office, who is involved with the project.

In Illinois, a series of meetings between team members and state officials helped get a commitment from

the Illinois Department of Public Aid to pursue more food stamp fraud cases, and from the Illinois Bureau of Law Enforcement to become more involved in food stamp investigations as well.

Team suggests improvements

In Michigan, the team helped with a broad-scale investigative follow-up to the state's wage matching effort. Using a computer, the state had compared food stamp records with Social Security wage files and come up with a list of thousands of people who had earned income that was not reported to the welfare office. Team members made three trips to Michigan to help state managers pare down the list and focus their investigative work on the most acute cases of fraud.

As the project, known as "Project Clear," developed, the technical assistance team made many suggestions for improvements. "The team was quite helpful," says Dave Wigent, director of the Office of Systems Development and Support in the Michigan Department of Social Services.

"We went along with their recommendations without exception because we could see how they were going to make the system an easier one to administer."

The state looked at cases for three programs—food stamps, AFDC, and general assistance. "We ended up with more than 6,000 cases that had reported little or no earnings, and we were finding that many of them had earnings in excess of $10,000. Some had up to $40,000," Wigent says.

"About 80 percent of these were referred for prosecution during the first year of Project Clear. So it's really been a boon to our state in terms of trying to clean up some of these fraudulent activities. It also has a tremendous deterrent effect on future recipients who may think about ripping off the system."

Through Project Clear, state managers have identified $40 million in overpayments to recipients in the three programs they've been looking at. They're now involved in the second round of the project.

Noting the extensive press and television coverage of Michigan's effort, Liza Cowden says the technical assistance team has given anti-fraud efforts added visibility. "I think the business of helping states is more attractive than sanctioning them," she says, "as necessary as sanctions might be."

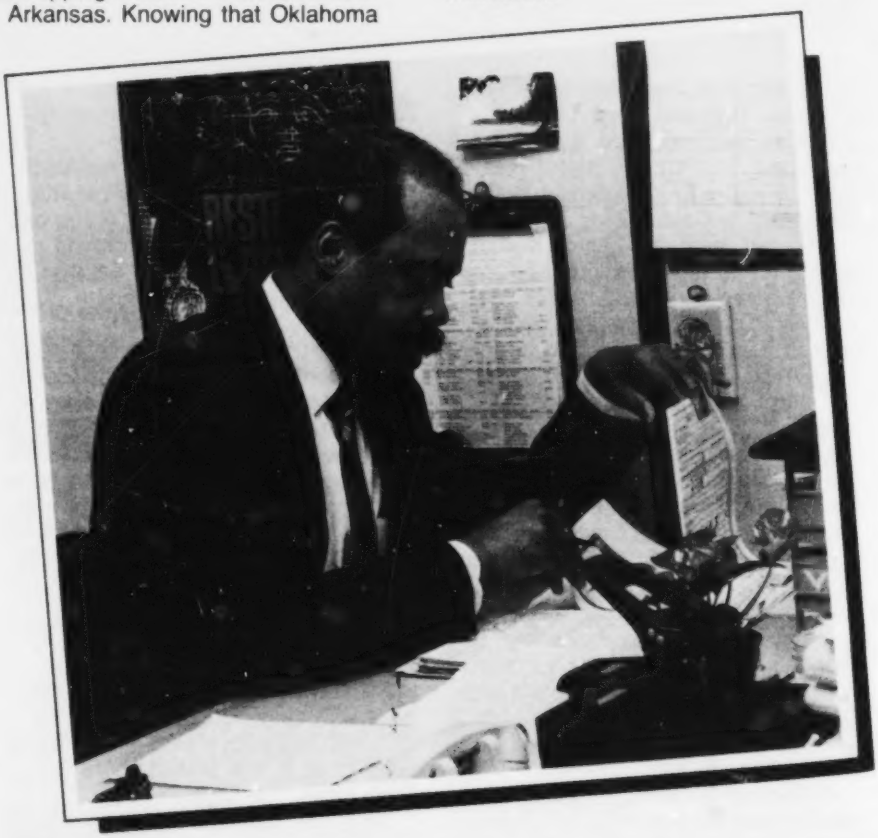
Southwest

FNS' Southwest region has used its technical assistance team to expand its very active State Exchange Program. Instead of putting special emphasis on the team aspect of technical assistance, the regional office provides a list of team members and their specialties to states and encourages them to contact the individuals for help. The team has helped set up a number of very successful exchanges.

One of the most successful exchanges to date involved some idea-swapping between Oklahoma and Arkansas. Knowing that Oklahoma was looking for an error-reduction strategy that would qualify for enhanced funding, FNS regional staff suggested Oklahoma take a look at Arkansas' Field Investigation concept.

Under Arkansas' system, when an eligibility worker finds a case suspected of being fraudulent, he or she refers it to the field investigator stationed in the certification office for a quick check within the application processing deadline. This prevents errors "up front" before applicants are certified.

The Oklahoma staff had been considering using special verification workers in their offices, but they found that these workers did not qualify for enhanced funding because they verified all error-prone cases. To qualify for enhanced funding, such workers must investigate cases suspected of being fraudulent.



Bob Jackson (above) is an investigator for the successful special investigations unit in Camden County, New Jersey. When an eligibility worker, like Cheryl Wright (opposite page), encounters questionable information on a food stamp application, Jackson or one of the county's other special investigators takes prompt action.

Trip results in new project

A representative from Oklahoma traveled to Arkansas, using State Exchange funds, and decided to design a project similar to Arkansas' for her state. FNS approved enhanced funding for the new project, called Field Eligibility Examiners (FEE), and provided additional State Exchange funds for technical assistance team member Ann Ruffin of Arkansas to travel to Oklahoma to help train the new workers.

Oklahoma's FEE project got underway in July, with five investigators in Oklahoma City and five in Tulsa. The state began realizing savings right away—in the first 2 months, the program prevented more than $130,000 in ineligible payments from being issued, and helped to identify a large number of overpayments as well. FEE investigators found that more than half of the cases they looked at involved false information.

Other successful exchanges included Arkansas' demonstrating a system that will help Texas expand its use of direct mail issuance of food stamps to prevent loss and improve efficiency of distribution.

Arkansas' automated system for assigning serial numbers to certified mail makes it possible to track food stamp benefits back to individual cases. The Texas Department of Human Resources estimates the system will eliminate hundreds of hours of manual effort.

Texas, in turn, provided training and advice last July to investigators from New Mexico's new Program Integrity Bureau. Texas shared some of its techniques of successful food stamp fraud investigation and prosecution, such as prosecutor agreements and an automated case reporting system used by investigators. The two states discussed the potential for future interstate computer matches.

Mountain Plains

The Mountain Plains regional office, like the Southwest, has chosen a less structured approach for its technical assistance team. The team operates primarily as a group of expert individuals whom food stamp managers can call on for guidance. The approach has gotten results in many areas.

In December 1984, for example, team members reviewed anti-fraud activities at the Kansas state office. As a result of their recommendations, state managers dramatically increased the amount of anti-fraud funding they were receiving from FNS—from $20,000 in 1984 to $200,000 in 1985. In addition, the state set up a unit of pre-certification investigators in Wichita and has plans for similar units in Topeka and Kansas City.

In Colorado, the team suggested changes that would enable the state to pass 75-percent funding through to county prosecutors. The Colorado Department of Social Services worked to get the needed changes through the state legislature, and is now negotiating agreements with all prosecutors in the state.

Project in Utah goes statewide

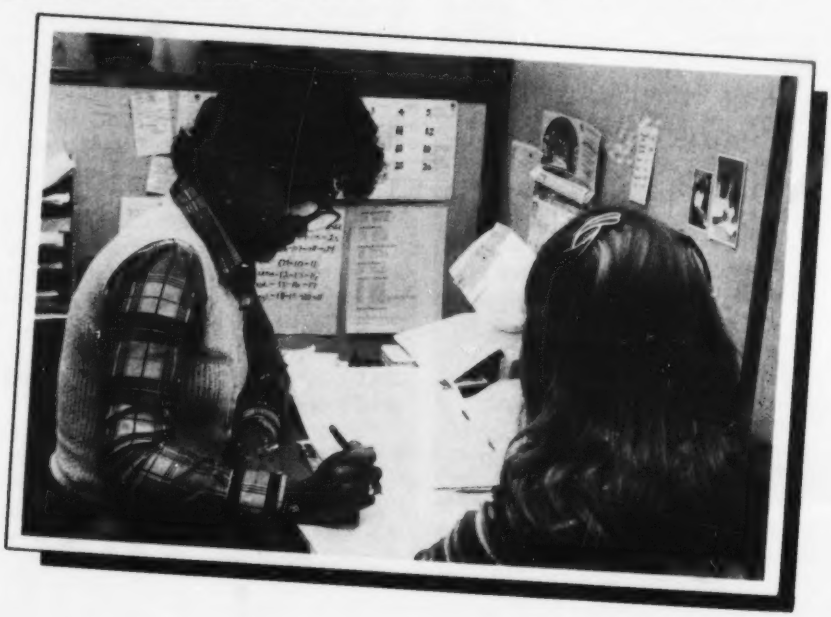
In Utah, state representatives worked closely with FNS regional staff in trying to find a solution to the state's high error rate. The regional staff found that because Utah had three state level offices dealing with the Food Stamp Program, there was no one organization to coordinate special activities, making change in the state's program somewhat difficult to accomplish.

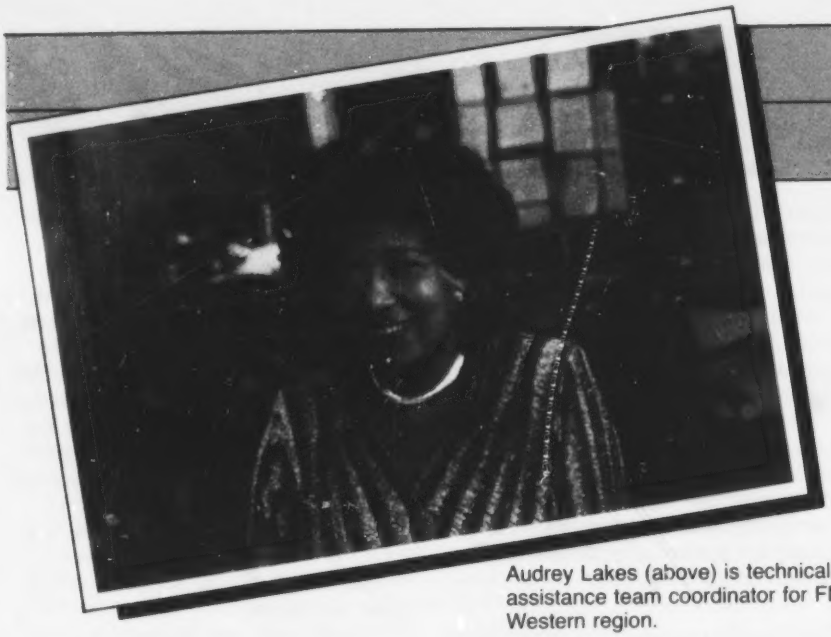
They thought a project called Project Integrity—used by a number of states around the country—might help. The basic goal of Project Integrity is to reduce client error by making food stamp applicants and recipients more aware of their responsibility to accurately report household circumstances. This is done through a major news media campaign that focuses on a joint federal-state review of a large sample of cases.

Using State Exchange funds, the Mountain Plains team arranged for representatives from Iowa and South Dakota to go to Utah and make a presentation on how Project Integrity worked in their states. Utah state managers took what they thought were the most effective components of each state's program and came up with their own Project Accuracy.

Utah's version of Project Integrity was the first to go statewide. It encompassed food stamps, AFDC, and Medicaid. FNS' regional office staff worked closely with the state as the project developed, reviewing materials and taking part in training sessions for investigators. The state's media blitz got underway in September, and the project ran through December.

Part of the effort's success was that it fostered a great deal of cooperation.





Audrey Lakes (above) is technical assistance team coordinator for FNS' Western region.

"The offices at the state level worked very closely on this," says Utah's Terry Johnson, coordinator for Project Accuracy. "I think we all have the same goals."

Western Region

FNS' Western regional office puts a strong emphasis on the team approach. Although team members generally go out alone on technical assistance missions, the entire group gets together once a year to draw on collective experiences in a planning and strategy session. The regional office directs the effort by analyzing state problems through internal reporting documents and federal reviews and targeting specific technical assistance for states.

A big success story for the region, according to team coordinator Audrey Lakes, has been Washington State's progress in increasing prosecutions and investigations. The increase is a result of implementing a fraud prosecution agreement between county prosecutors and the Washington Department of Social Services.

With enhanced funding, FNS pays for 75 percent of the cost of prosecuting food stamp fraud cases. The new agreement in Washington allows the state to pass that funding directly to county prosecutors. This gives county prosecutors incentive to go after welfare fraud cases, which come across their desks for prosecution mingled with homicides and other more serious crimes.

The results are dramatic

In 1983, prior to the agreement, Washington completed only 6 fraud prosecutions involving just over $8,000 and only 230 fraud investigations involving $36,000. Last year, with the agreement in place, the state completed 337 prosecutions involving more than $150,000 and more than 6,000 investigations involving $1.7 million. "It's really remarkable," says Lakes.

Arizona has had many success stories involving anti-fraud funding as well. Technical resource team member Charlie Sharp, chief of the Office of Special Investigations for the Arizona Department of Economic Security, has brought many innovations to his state, including a project inspired by a California program.

Last year Sharp sent an assistant to look over the Early Fraud Detection Program in California's Orange County and liked what he heard about it enough to test the idea in a Phoenix certification office for 3 months. The project involved stationing an investigator in the local office to check out cases of suspected fraud before applicants were certified.

Savings from one investigator handling food stamp, AFDC, and general assistance cases over 3 months amounted to $13,000 in actual dollar savings. "There's no question that it was cost-effective," says Sharp.

"We've found that of 160 referrals in that 3 months, nearly 40 percent were fraudulent." Sharp is working on getting a permanent Early Fraud Detection Program installed in the state's two major cities, Phoenix and Tucson.

Sharp's office is efficiently set up with a special food stamp fraud unit. "This makes it much easier for me to identify for funding purposes the effectiveness of anti-fraud efforts," he says.

In addition, last April he set up a statewide fraud hotline which consistently generates about 350 calls from the public each month. FNS' 75 percent funding pays for hotline expenses involving food stamp cases. Each referral is followed up. "They're turning in a lot of information to the workers," Sharp says. "We're quite pleased with it."

Team approach is effective

For all of these technical assistance team initiatives, the real success lies in getting management's commitment, says Western region's Audrey Lakes. "You can best do that by actually going out to the state and presenting yourself as part of a federal-state team, working together toward common objectives."

"It enhances the communication process," she says, "to start out by saying, 'This is a benign mission. It's not a review.' Right away they know you're there to help them—they're not going to get sanctioned as a result of this visit," says Lakes.

The team concept builds on enhanced funding, State Exchange, and other efforts FNS has made to balance incentives with sanction management. This is why the teams have proven to be such an effective way to transfer knowledge and why in so many instances the effort has already resulted in immediate action by states.

"We know that sanctioning states is not what we really want to do, although it sometimes turns out to be the bottom line," says Lakes. "But we really don't want to take money away—we want the states to improve their performance. And I think the technical assistance concept, the team concept, really gets to the heart of that."

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article by Jane Mattern Vachon

Special Task Force Helps Baltimore Solve Problems

Getting back money for food stamps overissued to recipients is a big problem for many state and local food stamp agencies. In Baltimore, Maryland, a task force of federal, state, and city officials has been working on improving that city's food stamp claims system, and the teamwork has paid off.

As a result of changes enacted by the group, money collected from claims more than quadrupled in just one year. What's more, everyone involved agrees that working closely together has improved communications between federal, state, and local food stamp officials.

Group formed to solve problems

The task force was formed in June 1984, after a review conducted by staff from the Food and Nutrition Service's Mid-Atlantic regional office (MARO) showed some serious problems with the claims system of the Baltimore City Department of Social Services.

"The review showed that Baltimore's operation was entirely too decentralized," says task force member Jim Goodale, chief of MARO's program accountability and analysis unit.

"There were at least 22 units acting independently, and there was little control of the claims from the time they were established until they were collected. Because we felt that Baltimore's claims system warranted special handling, we decided to suggest to the state that a task force be formed."

Shortly after the task force was organized, Baltimore's program was audited by USDA's Office of Audit. The findings, substantial in number, echoed MARO's concerns. "The system in Baltimore City was so unorganized that the USDA auditors could not track the claims through the system," says Goodale.

According to Baltimore City managers, when the audit was presented to them, there was hardly anything in it they could take exception to.

"It was obvious we needed to improve our operation. We needed to make some significant corrections, and we needed help from the state and federal levels," says Gary Balzer, deputy director for the Baltimore City Department of Social Services and task force member.

"Because of the extent of the audit, just responding to its recommendations was a huge job. We needed to reorganize to accomplish the recommendations." And that's essentially what the task force did during its monthly meetings.

A number of changes made

The group, which consists of about a dozen managers and supervisors, took a careful look at the various units and duties assigned to each and came up with a plan to rearrange and consolidate them.

A standard operating procedure was written detailing the control and monitoring of the paper flow, and timeframes were established. Supervisors were designated for the new sections within the claims unit, and responsibilities were assigned to them and their staff.

Centralizing the system significantly corrected Baltimore's problems. With the system now, claims are being accounted for, calculations checked, errors scrutinized, accounts receivable opened, collections pursued, and records maintained.

"Our automated income maintenance system could identify claims, but recoupment wasn't possible because the number of claims was so high," says Balzer. "We had limited ability to collect the monies owed to us. Reorganizing our existing staff responded to our need for a better claims and recoupment system."

To meet its goals, the task force needed to do a lot of information sharing. From dealing with the claims system used in other states within their region, MARO officials were able to offer some valuable suggestions. The city staff provided information on ways these ideas could fit into their overall operation.

"We gave city officials our ideas on how they could enhance their system," says John Garrett, supervisor of MARO's program accountability unit. "They, in turn, told us whether our ideas were workable.

"There were a lot of things we were not aware of when we began. We needed to figure out, for example, how caseworkers would fit public and general assistance and Medicaid claims into their workload. Initially we were only thinking about food stamp claims."

The Maryland Department of Human Resources was responsible to answer for the review and audit. State agency

At a task force meeting last fall, city, state, and federal officials discussed improvements in Baltimore's claims system. Several city food stamp managers are pictured here (counterclockwise from bottom right): Gary Balzer, Kathy Lacey, Arthur Wall, Mahfuz Maghal, Thomas Manning, Karen Walker, and Nancy Wegman.

task force members provided quick turnaround on computer printouts that allowed city managers to monitor progress.

Group's work has paid off

Statistical information more than proves the success of the efforts of the task force. The dollar value of claims established increased from $500,000 during the first three quarters of 1984 to more than $1.9 million during the same period of 1985. Claims collected during this time increased from $31,719 to $47,795.

In addition to improvements in the claims system and the resulting cost savings, there were additional benefits that came from the organization of the group. For one, task force members agree that working together often brought fast resolution to problems.

Nancy Wegman, director of Maryland's Office of Public Assistance, says working as a task force is much better than "bouncing back and forth with letters and phone calls."

Diplomacy rather than bureaucracy was the key to the success of the task force, according to its members.

"We structured the meetings to be as informal as possible so that we could discuss the problems directly with people at the local level," says Goodale.

"In the past, we have met with state agencies at formal audit conferences where the findings were discussed and timeframes for collective action set. In that situation, it's usually a 2-hour meeting, and a lot of correspondence takes place by mail afterwards before anything is resolved."

Task force meetings, on the other hand, lasted longer but provided more immediate results. "We sat down in a room with the state people and the Baltimore City staff and went back and forth with ideas until we found ways to resolve the problems," says Goodale. "As a result of these sessions, Baltimore City's claims processing began to take shape as a workable system within 6 months."

Working together is now easier

The informality of the group rested the fears of city officials who felt they may be excluded from the decision-making process.

"I think that when the task force began there was an element of suspicion," says Balzer. "There was a feeling that everything we did was under a microscope. As the meetings progressed, it became apparent that the federal and state people were receptive to our ideas, and they didn't try to undermine our authority. The federal and state people were there to listen to us."

Another added benefit is the improvement in the relationships between offices.

"This was the first time the three levels of government sat down together to look at a problem," says Goodale. "I have seen a tremendous turnaround in the attitudes of the people who are on the task force.

"My staff, for example, have a much better rapport with both the Baltimore City Department of Social Services and the state agency, as well as a different level of respect for them."

State agency staff say they are working more closely with FNS than they ever have. And city representatives say they now have no qualms about speaking directly to federal officials—something that wasn't true before.

Even though the audit is near closure, the group has agreed to continue to work together on other aspects of the Food Stamp Program on an as-needed basis.

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article by Marian Wig
photos by Larry Rana

With the recent changes made as a result of task force recommendations, it's now easier for the Baltimore staff to collect overpayments made to food stamp recipients. Here, two caseworkers from the overissuance unit, Virginia Johnson and Francis Jackson, check information from the computer files.

Mid-Atlantic Region Hosts Equipment Conference

Helping state and local food program staff sharpen their management skills has been the goal of a number of technical assistance efforts sponsored by the Food and Nutrition Service. Bringing people together to share skills and information has been a key part of many of these efforts.

This spring, FNS' Mid-Atlantic regional office (MARO) hosted a conference on procuring equipment for school kitchens. The first equipment conference FNS has ever sponsored, it gave state and local school food service managers the chance to talk directly with food service equipment representatives, industry consultants, and school lunch directors who have solved equipment-related problems.

"The conference was designed to provide an opportunity for school food service administrators to view exhibits of the latest food service equipment and to learn directly from industry representatives," says Robert Freiler, regional director of special nutrition programs for MARO.

"One of the most important things for school lunch managers to learn is how to develop specifications that will allow them to get the equipment they need without spending more than they have to for it."

Suggested at an earlier conference

The conference was planned as a follow-up to MARO's successful food procurement conference held in Downington, Pennsylvania, in April 1983, and was, in fact, suggested by participants at that conference.

The high attendance at the equipment conference proved that the idea was a popular one. More than 200 local school food service people from throughout the Mid-Atlantic states attended, along with 60 representatives from 25 major food service manufacturers.

The conference, which was held in Williamsburg, Virginia, featured panel discussions on a variety of topics and exhibits ranging from freezers, stoves, and salad bars, to complete systems for bulk preparation of food.

Conferees had plenty of time to talk with exhibitors about their equipment needs and problems. Exhibitors and panelists alike stressed the importance of properly selecting equipment.

Panelists stress careful planning

One panel of experts discussed the most common problems encountered when procuring equipment. Panelists included an equipment sales representative, a food service consultant, a food service equipment manufacturer, and a local school food service manager.

They explained how to develop specifications and how to accurately describe the specific piece of equipment needed. They also told conferees how they can avoid being "stuck" with equipment that does not meet their needs by securing detailed information on what they need and by writing very detailed specifications.

A panel of local school food service directors summarized their recent experiences with cafeteria renovation and talked about how they secured funds for their projects. This panel of peers shared the problems they had to deal with in order to make needed changes. With ingenuity and some minor structural, design, and equipment changes, they told the group, cafeteria renovation is possible at a minimal cost.

Panelist Sara Stevenson, food service supervisor for the Indian River School District in Frankford, Delaware, stressed the importance of community and school board support.

Lynda Baltzer, food service supervisor for the Capital School District in Dover, Delaware, described the renovation of a school cafeteria built in 1922. The renovation, she said, has not only given the cafeteria a facelift, but has made a noticeable improvement in the way students feel about school lunch.

A presentation on planning new and remodeled kitchens focused on learning from other people's mistakes. Using slides, food service systems specialist Victor Canevello identified some common problems resulting from errors made in planning, construction, and design. He showed, for example, how placing equipment just a few inches off specifications could ruin the efficiency of a kitchen.

Besides panel discussions on equipment, there were also some special presentations. These included a food demonstration using USDA-donated rice; a presentation on foods of the future, including dehydrated fruits and vegetables; a presentation by the Dairy Council on merchandising and using dairy products; and a discussion on the implementation of a school food service program in Egypt and Saudi Arabia.

Baking is just one of the tasks made easier in a carefully designed and properly equipped school kitchen.

Conference was a cooperative effort

From the start, the conference was a cooperative effort. Planning for the conference included a survey of state agencies to determine interests and needs, and the agenda later developed was based on state agency suggestions for topics and exhibits.

Vera Adkins, conference coordinator for the American School Food Service Association, shared her expertise on planning exhibit areas. She outlined exhibit area requirements, provided a

sample contract, and assisted in the selection of the firm to handle setting up and taking down the displays.

According to FNS conference coordinator Rich Mallam, the logistics were complicated. "The biggest challenge," he says, "was lining up interested companies and meeting their needs, while complying with the requirements and limitations of the decorator, the conference center, and the firm handling the heavy equipment."

Making sure tons of equipment would be shipped, delivered, and set up in time was just the beginning for conference planners. They also had to make sure each exhibitor would have enough space as well as access to electricity and, in some cases, water, and they had to make sure their plans complied with local fire codes.

"In order to pull this whole thing off," says Mallam, "we needed additional wiring. Even the air conditioning needed to be modified so that enough electricity could be supplied." Mallam credits the conference staff for playing a key role in making sure everything went smoothly.

Participants found conference worthwhile

For participating in the conference, school food service staff received certificates from FNS. Continuing education credits were available through the American Dietetic Association and the American School Food Service Association. These credits are important to members for professional growth and maintenance of their certification.

Evaluation comments received at the end of the conference were positive. Participants felt they had benefited most from the presentations on equipment specifications, cafeteria redesign, and planning for new and redesigned kitchens. They also found the equipment exhibits helpful.

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article by Carol Savage

SNAP Project Catches On In the Southwest

School lunch programs work best when there's open communication between food service staff, parents, and students. In the Southwest, a project called SNAP—School Nutrition Action Project—is encouraging open communication and helping schools make positive changes in their lunch programs.

The project, which began in one school in New Mexico, is now catching on in schools in several states, thanks to FNS' Southwest regional office.

Project began in Albuquerque

A group of concerned parents gave birth to the project at Albuquerque's Longfellow Elementary School when they petitioned Elaine Atkins, food service director for the Albuquerque public schools, to make some major changes in their children's school lunch menus. Adkins was a bit hesitant when the parents' demands were first laid before her, but realized that the motivation the group had could be a powerful ally if channeled in the right direction.

"Some of the changes they wanted to make were financially impossible," she says, "and others just weren't nutritionally sound. What we finally agreed to do was to form a smaller working group where the parents and I would review the menus and work on modifications. Then we would call the entire group back together and discuss what we could and couldn't do."

Extensive negotiations finally culminated in menus both sides were pleased with. Some of the modifications included such things as using whole wheat flour in all baked goods and bread items, serving fresh fruits and vegetables as often as possible and, when canned fruits are served, using those that are packed in their own juices rather than in syrup.

Because of the success in working with parents and making changes at Longfellow, Adkins decided to formalize the process in a project that could be expanded to other Albuquerque schools. She set three main goals: involving parents and students; modifying menus; and building a nutrition network that could help schools teach children to take responsibility for their own well-being by arming them with solid nutrition knowledge.

Other schools eager to join

Other Albuquerque schools were quick to join. In addition to Longfellow, more than 30 public schools in the city now have SNAP. To participate, each school must set up a nutrition committee and incorporate nutrition education into its curriculum.

The nutrition committee, usually composed of the cafeteria manager, the school nurse, a teacher, a parent and a couple of students, is responsible for evaluating school menus and making many of the decisions on what changes will be made. Committee members evaluate the success or failure of the changes and make adjustments accordingly.

"One issue that always comes up is whether or not chocolate milk should be served," Adkins says.

Opinions on the subject run the entire gambit. "Some people are convinced that chocolate is going to ruin us all," says Adkins. "Others are willing to tolerate it if it's the only way they can get their kids to drink milk.

"Many schools," she continues, "take a middle ground and offer chocolate milk twice a week, or so." Adkins tries to allow the schools as many internal decisions as possible.

"I want each school to feel that the project is theirs," she says. "They have to ask to become a SNAP school." The request can come from the school nurse, counselor, principal, a teacher, a parent—anyone who is interested.

Motivation is key to success

One thing Adkins and her staff learned from the Longfellow experience was that the project works best

SNAP SNAP SNAP

when motivation is already present within the school community.

As a result, they have relied mainly on word-of-mouth advertising for bringing schools into the program. They have, however, readily accepted invitations to speak to interested groups, and they have published a booklet to explain the program to school staff, teachers, students, and parents. The booklet outlines the project's guidelines and contains related nutrition information, health hints, and class projects.

Adkins' staff includes a nutrition coordinator who is responsible for the nutrition education component of SNAP. She conducts one in-service workshop per month for food service employees, plus two full-day training sessions during the year for cafeteria managers. On request, she makes nutrition education presentations to students in their classrooms.

She also publishes a newsletter which contains, among other things, nutrition education lessons that can be adapted by teachers for classroom use. The newsletter is distributed to all schools, each of the district's area offices, and to the school system's curriculum staff.

Adkins' staff is currently working with nutrition experts at the University of New Mexico on a curriculum which Adkins hopes to disseminate throughout the district once it has been developed and tested.

Participating schools see positive changes

Preliminary results of a research project Adkins conducted, again in conjunction with the University of New Mexico, show that children in SNAP schools have a significantly more positive attitude toward school lunch than do children without SNAP.

Good food and nutrition education go hand in hand for schools participating in SNAP. Begun in New Mexico, the project is now catching on in other Southwest states.

The positive attitude came through loud and clear for Jan Jones, chief of the school nutrition programs unit for the Food and Nutrition Service's Southwest region, when she visited Albuquerque for a first-hand look at SNAP in action.

Part of the beauty of the project, says Jones, is its simplicity. "The menu modifications the schools are making are quick and easy. They boil down to simply incorporating the dietary guidelines into their menu-planning process.

"This is really nothing new," she adds, "because the dietary guidelines have been part of the school lunch menu planning guide for several years. SNAP, however, gives the concept a keener focus.

"Albuquerque schools have also taken full advantage of parent and student involvement in the project and are indirectly using it as a marketing tool. The end result is increased stature for school lunch in the community. They seem to be reaping enormous benefits from making a few simple changes."

Taking the idea to the states

Jones and others at the regional office level were convinced this was an idea other school districts could use. They felt they could do regionally what Adkins had done in Albuquerque—that is, make the SNAP concept known, offer assistance if needed, then wait for interest to be shown.

They began by presenting the SNAP concept to state directors of school nutrition and food distribution programs and incorporating the directors' suggestions into an overall project design.

They kept the three components of SNAP—menu modification, parent and student involvement, and nutrition education—but wrote SNAP objectives broadly enough to accommodate differences among states and schools.

To help communities learn about and use the project, the regional staff developed a slide and tape presentation and a prototype press packet for use by both state agencies and local school districts.

The slide/tape series, in addition to explaining what SNAP is, explores how eating habits are developed and how research is now showing that our health may be related to our dietary habits.

The prototype press packet provides a sample news release, two taped public service announcements that can be reproduced and distributed locally, sample fact sheets, and a few important tips on planning a successful publicity campaign or media event, such as inviting local reporters to join students for a SNAP lunch.

To encourage idea-sharing, Jones and her staff put together a bulletin called "SNAP-Shots." A concise summary of SNAP activities occurring at the state and local levels, "SNAP-Shots" is distributed periodically throughout the Southwest region.

States respond in various ways

As Jones explains, each state agency's approach to SNAP has been different. "Some, like the Oklahoma Department of Human Services, which administers the private school programs, liked what they saw, trained their food service personnel during summer workshops, and implemented the concept with the opening of school this fall."

The education departments in Louisiana and New Mexico presented the SNAP concept this spring and summer at school food service association conventions and other meetings and workshops for local school food service personnel.

The Oklahoma Department of Education decided to target SNAP toward their largest school districts first and, in Texas, the Department of Human Services saw a logical role for SNAP in their Nutrition Education and Training (NET) Program.

During the coming year, Jones hopes states in the region will focus on different aspects of SNAP and share with each other what they develop. The FNS regional office's role will be to facilitate this sharing.

"One thing we hope to accomplish is to place our school programs back in a position of leadership," she adds. "People today are extremely interested in health and fitness. It's a perfect opportunity for school nutrition programs to become known as a reliable source for nutrition information and to play an important role in combatting misinformation."

Each issue of "SNAP-Shots" ends with the slogan "Better Nutrition is a SNAP." For schools in the Southwest, it's a slogan—and a reality—that's becoming increasingly familiar.

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article by C. Kay Blakley

Newsletter Helps Midwest States Share Information

When the state education commissioners in the Midwest directed their staff to make nutrition and fitness a priority, the Food and Nutrition Service's Midwest regional office (MWRO) looked for a way to help.

What they came up with is a newsletter called "Nutrition and Fitness—A Winning Combination." Like "SNAP-Shots" in the Southwest, the newsletter is a vehicle for sharing information and ideas on nutrition activities.

"Nutrition and Fitness" is put together by MWRO's nutrition and technical services staff in cooperation with the region's child nutrition program staff. The newsletter features brief articles researched and written by regional office staff or by state NET (Nutrition Education and Training Program) coordinators.

Articles highlight exemplary state activities as well as successful classroom and cafeteria activities in individual school districts. The newsletter also includes a calendar of nutrition events throughout the Midwest and descriptions of available nutrition education materials.

Format allows states flexibility

In planning the newsletter, the MWRO staff looked for an approach that would allow states the most flexibility in using the information. "What we came up with," says Robert Dean, nutrition and technical services director for the region, "is a format that makes it easy for state staff to excerpt topics that are of interest to their schools."

When the regional staff finishes putting together an issue of the newsletter, they give each state department of education what is called a "camera ready" copy. If the state staff wants to send out the entire newsletter, they can use this camera-ready material to have copies printed. If they want to excerpt sections of the newsletter, they simply pull out what they want and include the information in their own materials.

Each state has chosen its own method for distributing the newsletter. Minnesota, Illinois, Indiana, and Wisconsin regularly reprint excerpts in their food service newsletters that go to local school superintendents and food service directors. Michigan's staff duplicates some of the issues and sends them out with their newsletter. Ohio also uses entire issues.

In addition to using the material in regular mailings, some states have also planned special distributions. For example, when Wisconsin received the directive to teach fitness in the classroom, state staff included the newsletter in a mailing of nutrition aids to approximately 500 physical education teachers. The Ohio staff mailed 3,000 copies to physical education teachers, school nurses, home economics teachers, and food service directors.

Denise Barnes of Winfield, Illinois, is one of the physical education teachers who have been using the newsletter this year. She says she's found it helpful in her work with students, especially since limited budgets have made it difficult to secure teaching aids even though the school principal and superintendent are supportive of nutrition and fitness awareness.

"Winfield is a typical suburban community whose school district is suffering from a lack of funds because of a decrease in student population," says

Physical education teacher Denise Barnes shares nutrition information from the newsletter with principal Joe McHaley and students.

New Training Packets From New York Filled With Ideas

Barnes.

"The school no longer has special classes such as home economics, so nutrition has to be incorporated into the health and physical education classes."

When public attention was drawn to eating disorders like anorexia and bulimia, Barnes began to be concerned about the girls in her classes.

"Because my class is informal," she says, "I talk a lot with the girls. I found that fad diets were popular with the girls and there was a great deal of misinformation among the girls and their parents.

"The 'Nutrition and Fitness' newsletter helped me secure some really current information and teaching materials. I was able to find sources of publications, handouts and charts, and order them from the addresses given at little cost to the school. I also learned about some computer software programs that teach nutrition concepts."

MWRO pleased with results

FNS' Midwest regional staff is pleased to see that the newsletter is facilitating exchange among states. Interestingly enough, the process of planning the newsletter has also encouraged exchange *within* some states.

"In planning the newsletter," says Dick Gilbert, assistant chief for MWRO's school programs section, "the state child nutrition directors, the state NET coordinators, and the state physical education coordinators exchanged ideas with regional staff. In a number of instances, this helped the state staff have a more coordinated idea of how they wanted to approach nutrition and fitness efforts."

Since the first issue of "Nutrition and Fitness" came out in September 1984, there have been five additional issues, including one this month. For a copy, or for more information, write:
Information Staff
Midwest Regional Office, FNS, USDA
50 East Washington
Chicago, Illinois 60602

article and photos
by Mary Jane Getlinger

A new series of training packets is helping school lunch managers throughout New York State and may soon be helping managers in other states as well.

The packets, which contain information and suggestions for increasing school lunch participation, were developed by staff from the New York Department of Education, who worked closely with local school districts, parents, and students on them.

"We initiated the project to respond to needs expressed at the school and district levels," says Rebecca Gardner, who heads New York's Bureau of Health Education and Services and is NET (Nutrition Education and Training Program) coordinator for the state.

"Over and over, in workshops and meetings, school lunch directors had asked us for help and materials, and especially for posters and recipes. 'Give us materials and tell us how to use them' is the message we kept getting from these busy people. The kits were designed to do that."

Ideas came from all over

The state's health education and food management staff worked together to write and assemble the text and artwork for the packets.

There are 10 packets in all, with suggestions that can help school food service managers promote the value of school lunches, plan and serve meals kids like, and make the cafeteria a center of cheerful activities. State NET coordinators are conducting workshops to help food service staff apply the ideas in their own cafeterias.

In developing the kits, the staff drew material from all over. Ideas for garnishes were taken directly from a merchandising manual developed by eight Southeast states and distributed by FNS' Southeast regional office.

Other ideas were contributed by the state school food management staff, who kept an eye out for good ideas on their regular visits to monitor school lunch programs. The packet editors followed up on these tips by calling school lunch managers for more information, and sometimes modifying an idea to make it more effective or easier to adapt.

"It's foolish to duplicate efforts when so many excellent materials already exist," says Gardner. "Really new ideas are rare, but the information out there is not always convenient and accessible.

"These kits put information and resources at the finger tips of the people who plan and prepare each day's menus for the more than 2,700,000 children in New York schools."

The kits come in pocket folders with a different color for each of the 10 school months. The staff chose this format to make it easy for school lunch managers to remove and copy text and clip art and to add material to keep the packets up to date.

"We expect the packets to be used selectively," says Gardner. "Sometimes school staff will copy the materials directly, and sometimes they will simply use them to stimulate ideas. The packets are especially useful in training new school food service workers."

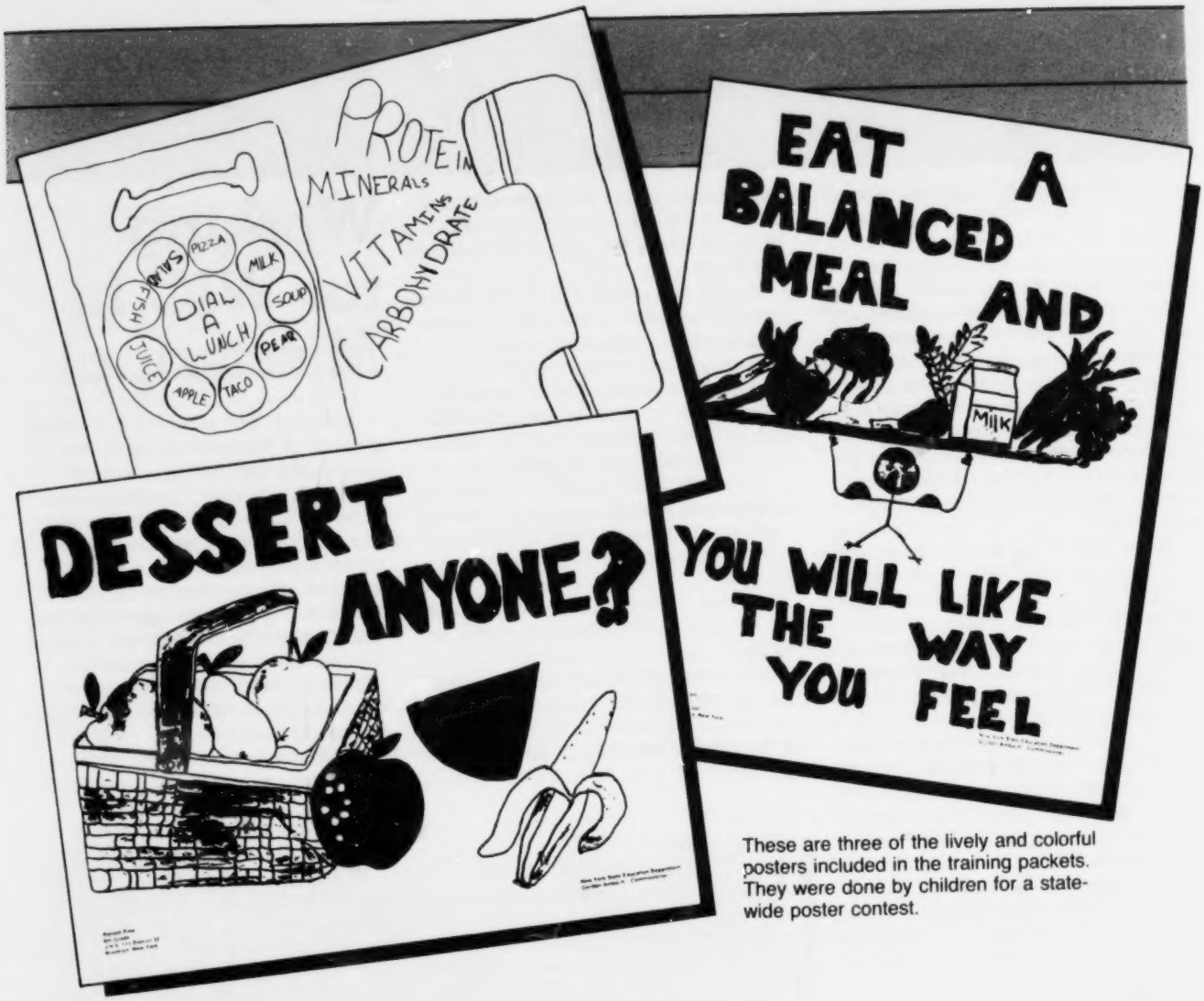
Each packet has a theme

"We decided to organize the material around a different theme or goal for each month," Gardner explains. "For example, the first volume has a getting-acquainted theme. Notes for the back of menus tell students, staff, and parents how the program operates and what constitutes a balanced meal. Complimentary meals are suggested as a promotion to introduce first graders to school lunches."

Another volume focuses on the bread and cereal food group and offers facts on the staple foods of other cultures. This packet urges directors to "toot your horn" during National School Lunch Week, and shows them how to present news and facts to the local media and community.

Another, which encourages the use of USDA-donated foods, includes a special section of commodity recipes in 100-serving sizes. The recipes were tested by a group of food service people attending an institute supported by an NET grant in Troy last year.

The group developed recipes for the finger foods that appeal to kids today, as well as dishes that reflect the ethnic



These are three of the lively and colorful posters included in the training packets. They were done by children for a statewide poster contest.

diversity of student tastes, such as *adobo*, a rice and pork casserole from the Philippines, quiche, and vegetarian bean tacos.

Other packets suggest ways to write and present a menu for holidays and other special occasions, how to involve children in decorating the cafeteria, and how to keep their interest with contests and prizes. For example, a child might win a prize for the best guess of the number of corn kernels in a jar, or for simply being at the cashier's table when a bell rings.

Each volume is introduced by a user's guide that explains the theme and suggests ways in which the contents may be used. Among the items included are menu layouts, models for cafeteria decorations, recipes, garnishes to make food more attractive, and activities children can look forward to, such as games, puzzles, and contests.

Menu-back fillers include information on nutrition, letters to enlist the interest and support of parents, and surveys to help managers find out what foods children prefer.

In addition to special theme material, all packets contain ideas that can be used throughout the year. They also include prize-winning art from the children. "We recently had a statewide nutrition poster contest for elementary students," Gardner explains. "The winning posters were so fresh and appealing, we used them to illustrate our themes. Each module contains a two-color or full-color reproduction of one of the winning posters."

The state department of education staff worked on developing the kits from March to September 1984. In December 1984, they began distributing copies to each of the state's 728 public school districts and 43 Boards of Cooperative Educational Services (administrative units that combine resources of small school districts). Gardner estimates that almost 90 percent of school districts are now using the materials.

Local directors closely involved

From the start of the project, Gardner and the staff were eager to involve school food service personnel. After they issued the first four modules, they asked readers to rate the materials and to suggest ways to improve them.

As a result of the suggestions, the staff added more commodity recipes and more puzzles and activities geared to younger children. For directors who wanted to send home to parents recipes for some of the children's favorite lunch dishes, they included recipes adjusted for family-sized kitchens. These can be printed on the backs of menus

under the heading "From Our Kitchen to Yours."

The state staff continue to work closely with local school food service managers. At the request of a school food service association or other sponsor, the NET staff make presentations on the materials at workshops held in various locations in the state. The sponsor picks the site for these presentations and invites participants.

Gordon Odermann, one of the state's three regional NET coordinators, has led a number of these workshops.

"First, we review the contents of the packets," he says. "Then, we choose an idea from one of the modules and carry it all the way through. For instance, we might choose a picnic and talk about how to promote the event. Without a big budget, you have to use a lot of imagination.

"We teach school lunch directors techniques like enlarging clip art onto poster board using an overhead projector. We might also create a menu, write a letter to parents, make table tents to alert the kids, and think up rules and prizes for a contest.

"Most directors will protest that they are not artists. When we have a workshop, the first thing they do is hand the pencil to someone else at their table. But after they actually complete a project together, their attitudes change."

To make it easier for people to use the materials, the state staff included an index for quick reference. "We didn't want these modules to wind up under a pile of papers," says Gardner.

Response has been positive

From the response so far, the modules are not likely to wind up under a pile of papers. In addition to the positive survey results, another measure of the modules' success is the creative ways school food service personnel are using them.

This is evident in the materials school food personnel bring along to show-and-tell workshop sessions. "In one packet," says Odermann, "everyone receives a picture of a tray to use in displaying the day's menu. But schools may complete it in different ways.

"In some, younger children have cut out food pictures from trade magazines. In others, art classes from higher grades have drawn and painted the items."

As the state staff had hoped, the modules are being used as resources to support the priorities of individual school lunchrooms and classrooms. One superintendent has already ordered a set so that he can integrate school lunch activities into the whole range of classroom teaching.

The completed project has been received with enthusiasm by school food workers throughout New York. Nutrition educators from the six other Northeast states have asked to use or adapt the materials. And best of all, more children are eating school lunches.

"Sixty percent of all schools using the kit have increased lunchroom participation," says Gardner. "We know the modules account for some of that growth."

For more information

The New York State Education Department will provide single free copies of the packets (everything except the posters) as long as supplies last. For a copy, or for more information, contact:
Bureau of School Food Management
and Nutrition
State Education Department
99 Washington Avenue
Albany, New York 12230
Telephone: (518) 474-1765

Copies of the posters may be obtained from the New York State School Food Service Association, which has reprinted them. Five posters are available, at a cost of $2.00 each, plus $1.50 for postage and handling.

Write to either:
Maria Riska
Phoenix Central School
400 Volney Street
Phoenix, New York 13135
Telephone: (315) 695-1516

Marcia Germaine
Burned Hills Ballston Lake
Central School
50 Cypress Drive
Scotia, New York 12302
Telephone: (518) 399-9141

article by Wini Scheffler

Nancy Kay Sullivan:

Working for WIC In Mississippi

In Mississippi, Nancy Kay Sullivan, director of public relations for the Mississippi Department of Health, heads up information activities for the state's WIC program. Sullivan, along with one part-time and six full-time assistants, plays an integral role in getting food help and health care to mothers and children who need it.

WIC, which stands for the Special Supplemental Food Program for Women, Infants, and Children, provides supplemental foods and nutrition education to low-income pregnant and breastfeeding women, infants, and children up to age 5 who are determined to be at risk because of nutrition-related health problems or inadequate diet.

WIC is just one of the 28 programs for which Sullivan has public relations responsibility. "All of our programs are equally important to us," she says, "but WIC is one of my favorites."

Like most government managers today, Sullivan has to work with limited resources. "There is too little time, staff, and money to accomplish everything I'd like to," she says.

But, according to John Barr, WIC director for the Bureau of Personal Health Services, Sullivan accomplishes plenty for WIC. "She is one of a kind," he says. "We're lucky to have her."

Work closely with local staff

Sullivan and her staff pride themselves on the strong link that exists between the state office, the 9 district offices, and the 82 county health departments. The cooperation and support of the district and county staff, Sullivan says, is crucial.

"Because of the strength of these relationships," she says, "information flows very smoothly within the state. Over the past 6 years, we have developed a standard public relations policy that all local agencies use. When we

have a message that needs to get down to the people, we are certain that the entire state will be blanketed with that same message."

Hurricane Elena proved just how well coordinated state and local efforts are. Fast and efficient teamwork enabled the health department to get information out quickly to people affected by the storm. For WIC, the situation was complicated by damage to WIC food supplies stored in county warehouses.

"More than $20,000 worth of infant formula was lost," Sullivan explains. "The stock in Pascagoula was 100-percent condemed. Cereals were wet and the labels had come off the formula, making it impossible to identify the contents.

"Besides the loss of the stock, the population served by WIC was the hardest hit. Some Mississippi recipients were without bottles for their children; there was no water; and housing was a problem for many WIC recipients.

"Our staff living on the coast were suffering from their own personal loss and tragedy, but they were in the office on the job within 48 hours after Elena hit, ready to do whatever they could to help the clients. The team spirit and dedication to the program kept us running," Sullivan recalls.

"Elena hit on Monday. On Tuesday we had infant formula for distribution, and by Wednesday we had issued a press release letting participants know where to go to pick up their supplemental packages on Thursday."

Materials tailored to clients' needs

As public relations director for WIC, Sullivan sees getting nutrition information to WIC recipients as an important part of her job.

"We target our efforts to females between 12 and 45," says Sullivan, "but even the 3-, 4-, and 5-year-olds picking up our materials and looking at the pictures will grasp some of the meaning."

The staff works hard to make certain that the words, graphics, and format of the materials communicate directly to WIC recipients. It is important that they understand the message but aren't left feeling they are being talked down to. The public health staff is aiming to change recipients' eating habits and in the long run improve the health of their families as well.

In their efforts to reach WIC recipients with nutrition information, Sullivan's office has been involved in the printing of the popular "Mississippi WIC Cookbook."

When the book was first published, Sullivan held press conferences in all nine Mississippi districts to introduce the book to WIC recipients, media representatives, and health department staff. County nutritionists used recipes from the book to prepare food with WIC ingredients for people at the press conference to taste.

The cookbook received positive reviews from the media as well as WIC recipients, who liked it enough to pass along the information they learned to neighbors and relatives. "We're looking forward to a revision and fourth printing of the cookbook," says Sullivan.

Mississippi has unusual program

A unique aspect of Mississippi's WIC program is its use of a direct distribution system for WIC food packages. Mississippi is the only state in the nation that operates exclusively with food distribution centers instead of giving WIC recipients vouchers to exchange at authorized food stores.

The distribution centers are warehouses located in all 82 counties. "We hear comments from other states suggesting that transportation would be an overwhelming disadvantage for their clients, but this system works best for us in Mississippi," says Sullivan.

"We have a very strong sense of family in Mississippi," she adds. "Some clients have to travel 10 to 15 miles to get to the food distribution center, but they work it out. Sally might not have a car, but Bobby Joe does, and he'll see that she gets there. We take care of each other."

Nancy Kay Sullivan and her staff have a full schedule providing information support for WIC and other programs of the Mississippi Department of Health. Working with 9 district offices and 82 county offices, they play a key role in getting information and educational materials to WIC participants throughout the state.

Compared to other states' WIC programs, Mississippi's food cost per participant is one of the lowest in the nation. The direct distribution of food is credited with this low cost. Because Mississippi can purchase products in large volume, the state is able to get a lower overall price than individual buyers.

This past year, the state adopted an "all or nothing" bid system for products, cutting the cost of a case of infant formula from $26.00 in 1984 to $14.16 in 1985. This year a case of formula will cost the state only $11.85.

This has enabled the state to serve more participants through WIC and has also allowed the state to introduce a popular new form of milk into the food package.

Because there is little or no refrigeration at the food distribution centers, dry milk and evaporated milk had been the milk products offered to participants. However, once money became available, the state WIC staff decided to purchase UHT (ultra-high temperature) low-fat milk for WIC participants. Sullivan was called on to help educate WIC clients about the new product.

"We needed to explain that the milk is fine on the shelf until it is opened, then it needs to be refrigerated," Sullivan says.

The public relations staff prepared 1-page fliers on the new product for WIC participants, and articles for publication in the journal *Mississippi's Health* for health professionals.

"There's always a lot to do ..."

Other projects Sullivan's staff are routinely involved in include: producing press kits for the media and information materials for health professionals throughout the state; preparing brochures and pamphlets requested by local and state nutritionists for use in teaching WIC participants; and putting together slide shows and audio-visual materials for special presentations. They have one of the Southeast's largest health-related audio-visual libraries for educators.

"There is always a lot to do for WIC," says Sullivan. "The program people are very creative and keep us busy. It's rewarding to have a part in making WIC work for Mississippi."

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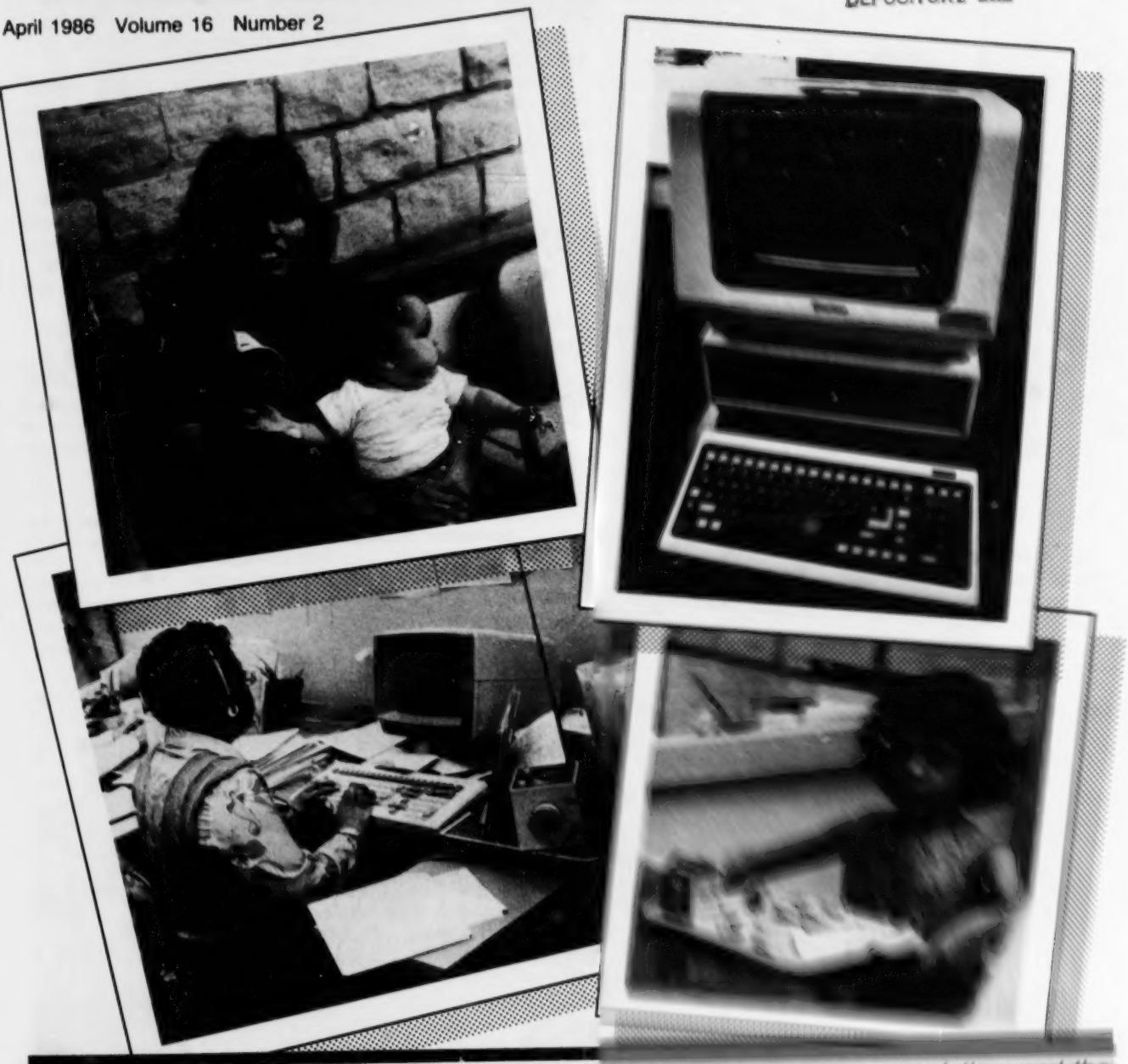


Just about everyone has been touched in some way by the computer revolution, and the people who manage the food assistance programs are no exception. ■ Articles in this issue look at some of the ways food program managers are using computers to improve their programs, save money, and provide better service to people in need of food help.

A 98.11:

Automating the Food Stamp Program

In Alaska, information from food stamp applicants is entered directly into a statewide computer system. In Reading, Pennsylvania, food stamp recipients use a plastic debit card instead of paper coupons to purchase groceries. At a Minnesota computer complex, 27 workers process redemption information on 230,000 grocery stores taking part in the program.

Across the country today, automation is changing the face of the Food Stamp Program, presenting opportunities and challenges for food stamp managers at all levels.

"There is no question that as we approach the 21st century, much of the entire food stamp delivery system will be automated," says Joseph Leo, deputy administrator for management at USDA's Food and Nutrition Service (FNS). It makes sense, he says, because one of the best applications of computers is keeping track of and analyzing large quantities of data.

"For the Food Stamp Program you're talking in the neighborhood of 20 million people getting monthly benefits. A program serving that size population is a perfect home for the computer," Leo says. "In addition, when you have a time-sensitive process, such as meeting the needs of hungry families, you want to be as responsive as possible."

Accountability also important

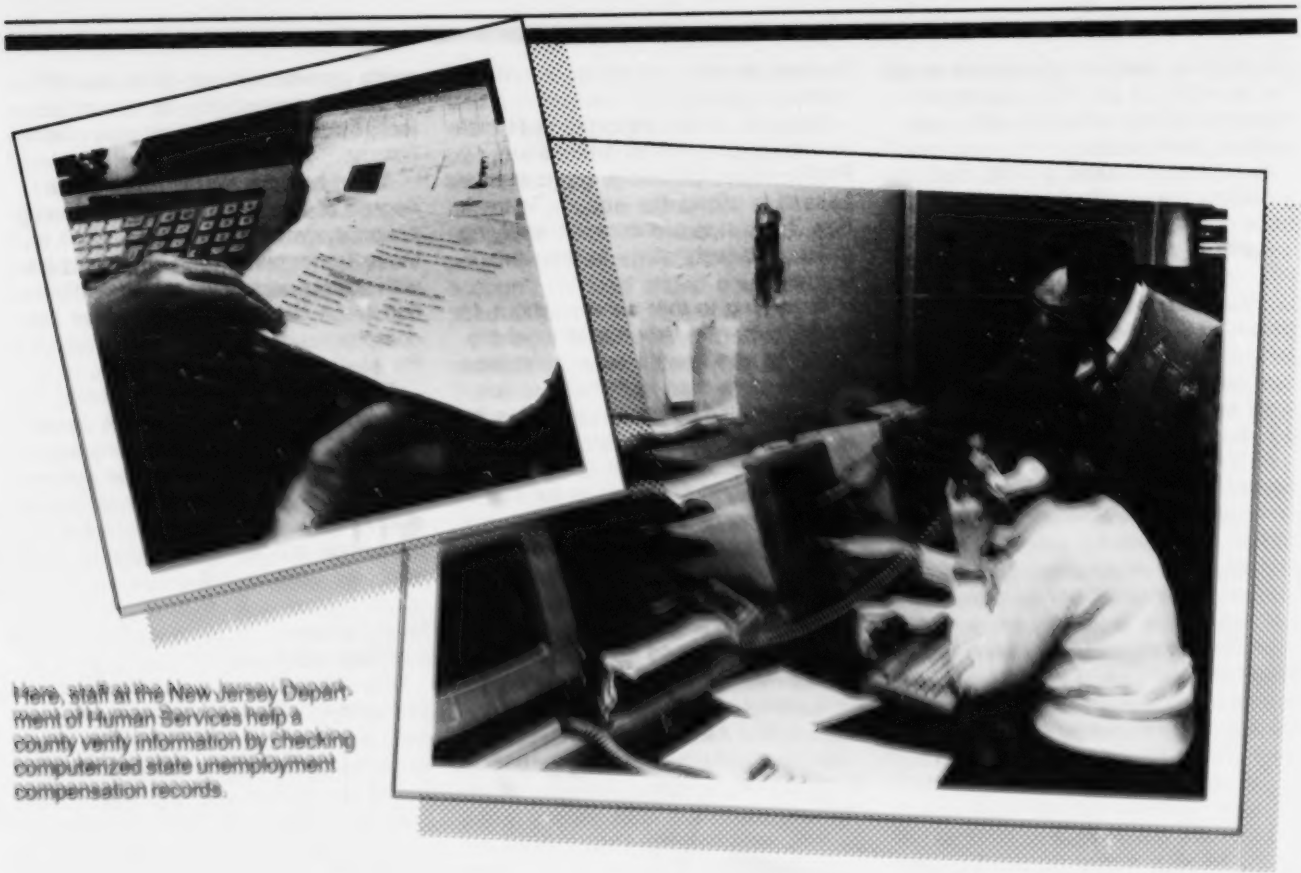
A multi-billion dollar program also demands accountability. Computers offer tremendous opportunities to streamline benefit delivery systems and improve accountability.

Some states have automated virtually every aspect of the food stamp delivery process—from certification and issuance, to follow-up investigations and claims collections. This has helped cut down on errors, prevent ineligible people from being certified, and track down people who are receiving benefits fraudulently.

At the federal level, FNS is finding new ways to use automation in tracking the 2½ billion food coupons which each year move through retail stores and the banking community. The agency is also using computers with its quality control system, which monitors errors made in a sample of more than 65,000 cases handled in certification and issuance office across the nation.

In time, computers may revolutionize the way FNS and states work together to keep track of program infor-

Many states use computers to verify information on food stamp applications before people are certified for the program.



Here, staff at the New Jersey Department of Human Services help a county verify information by checking computerized state unemployment compensation records.

mation, such as participation and coupons issued. Today, most of this data comes to FNS on paper forms, but the agency is laying the groundwork for receiving this data electronically from the states.

A system like this would relieve the current paradoxical situation where some states take information from their automated systems, enter it onto paper forms, and mail it to FNS—all to have FNS employees key it into the agency's computer system.

States encouraged to move ahead

Many state and local agencies have already seen a lot of changes. Right now all the states have active projects going on to automate their programs," Leo says. "Naturally, some are more advanced than others."

Ironically, some states that got into automation early in the 1970's now are lagging behind with outdated equipment. Others, like Alaska, Vermont, and Texas, have vaulted to the forefront with more recent, state-of-the-art systems.

In the past few years, for example, Texas has automated its client information intake process by installing more than 3,500 computer work stations in its certification offices. Computers guide the eligibility workers through the intake process, perform the calculations needed to determine eligibility, calculate the food stamp benefit, and print out the notice of action. Texas has also automated its quality control system, its fair hearings process, and its claims collection system. The state has also developed a system to track the status of applications for food stamps, AFDC, and Medicaid.

To get enhanced funding, a state first submits a proposal to FNS. FNS regional staff work with the state to make sure the proposal meets program requirements, is cost-effective, and is technologically likely to succeed. Projects involving more than $1 million must be approved by an executive committee at FNS headquarters chaired by Joe Leo.

Sharing information helpful to many

FNS strongly encourages the transfer of successful systems from one state to another when possible. North Dakota, for example, successfully adapted Alaska's advanced computer system with relatively little modification. Such transfers make good use of scarce federal development funds for automated data systems and can cut many months off the time it takes to get a system up and running.

The agency also encourages states to share information about their systems with each other. FNS helps to set up an automated link between a state system that can communicate with the computers in the other welfare programs in the state before enhanced funding will be granted.

Many states are taking advantage of FNS automated data processing (ADP) funding. In fiscal year 1984, 27 states received developmental funding at the 75 percent level, and 47

received 50 percent operational funding for ADP. In all, FNS provided more than $40 million for state computer system costs.

In addition to funding, FNS has provided states with technical assistance packages to help them make better use of their systems' capabilities. A recent package outlined the decisions and issues facing states developing automated claims systems. Another package described how states can use automated systems to verify applicants' social security numbers.

FNS has also provided states with a catalog of automated "front-end" verification techniques, which describes strategies for detecting fraud and errors on applications before food stamp benefits are issued. This is in addition to a catalog of program improvement activities, updated and distributed each year, which describes many automated projects in use around the country.

Survey shows various uses

Because of the importance of state and local progress in automation, FNS has established a computer data base that allows the agency to track how the states are doing in applying automated technology to their programs.

According to that survey, about 45 states currently have automated the eligibility and benefit calculation process. In more than half these states, the automated system not only is the sole method of calculating benefits, but goes further and makes the financial eligibility determination for the caseworker.

More than 40 states have automated case record files, and a similar number have automated preparation of some reports and notices such as monthly reports and notices of case actions. More than half the states have integrated databases for food stamps and AFDC.

Cross-checking information applicants provide against other sources of data has proven to be a very effective application for computer technology.

About half the states have some degree of automated "front-end" verification systems in operation. Nine of these do immediate on-line matches with state unemployment compensation wage data. Most states also do computerized verification after benefits are authorized.

To follow up on cases involving fraud or error, about 20 states have statewide automated claims tracking systems. Oregon's automated system for tracking and collecting food stamp claims, for instance, has helped the state triple the number of claims established each month.

New delivery systems tried

Most states have automated some part of their issuance systems as well. In some areas, computers generate the authorization-to-participate

This plastic magnetic strip card is the key to San Francisco's automated issuance system. When it is run through a terminal, the computer indicates the amount of the recipient's food stamp allotment.

(ATP) cards. In other instances, automated systems stuff coupons in envelopes sent to issuance sites or print labels for mail issuance.

Ten states use on-line issuance systems, primarily in urban areas. San Francisco's Food Stamp Automated Issuance and Reporting System (FAIR) is typical of these systems, which eliminate the need for ATP cards.

With on-line issuance, recipients get a permanent plastic magnetic strip card which they present at the issuance office. The issuing agent runs the card through a terminal, and the computer indicates the amount of the client's food stamp allotment. The coupons are issued and the transaction is entered into the computer. The system dramatically cuts down on duplicate transactions.

To date, the ultimate automated issuance system is being tested in Reading, Pennsylvania, where the food stamp coupon has been eliminated. Recipients have plastic, magnetic strip cards which they use at the grocery store. The clerk runs the card through a telephone-size terminal on the counter and the recipient punches a secret four-digit number into a hand-held keypad.

Use of the correct number authorizes the transaction. The food purchase is rung up on the cash register, and a central computer debits the recipients' electronic food stamp account and credits the grocer's bank account. No food stamp coupons are used at all.

Pennsylvania will run the Reading project, known as Electronic Benefit Transfer (EBT), through early 1988. Preliminary results from the project show that most retailers find the system easier to deal with than the coupons. Like the grocers, three-fourths of the Reading food stamp recipients prefer the electronic system. They like not dealing with the coupon books and not having to go to the bank to exchange an ATP card for coupons.

For USDA, the EBT system offers potential for reducing fraud in the program and for saving the cost of handling and processing billions of food stamp coupons each year. Final evaluation results from the first phase of the project are expected later this year.

More changes in the future

Just how electronic will the future Food Stamp Program be? It is too soon to tell. But trends indicate that in the near future more states will move to on-line issuance systems such as those in use in California and Michigan.

More eligibility workers will be equipped with automated work stations and will enter information provided by applicants directly into computers. Caseload information will be compiled in central data files, but managed by mini- and microcomputers in various locations around the state rather than by large central mainframe units.

USDA will continue to encourage automated systems integrating various welfare programs, increased use of front-end verification to prevent fraud and errors before benefits are issued, and better use of automation in follow-up wage matching to help focus investigative efforts on the most serious cases of fraud and abuse.

This year, for the first time ever, the legislation authorizing the Food Stamp Program sets a specific

schedule for USDA and the states to move ahead in automating program operations.

The Farm Bill, passed in December, calls for USDA to set up and work with a state advisory group on a model plan for automating data processing and computerizing information systems. This plan must be developed and made available for comments by October 1, 1986. USDA has until February 1, 1987 to consider the comments and complete the plan.

Using the model plan as a guide, each state will then develop and submit an individual plan, which will become part of the state's overall plan of operation. States must submit their plans by October 1, 1987.

By April 1, 1988 USDA must submit to Congress an evaluation of the states' plans. This report will include an analysis of any additional steps states must take to make their systems cost-effective and efficient. States must begin putting their plans into effect no later than October 1, 1988.

This means that within 2 years, food stamp managers in every state will have given considerable thought to how they will automate their programs. Automating will become even more of a priority than it already is.

Monitoring efforts greatly improved

Just as FNS is providing enhanced funding to states to improve their automated systems, the agency is investing in improvements at the federal level as well.

The oldest use of automation in the Food Stamp Program nationally has been to monitor the redemption activity of the retail food stores that take part in the program.

The Redemption Certificate Automation Program (RCAP) located in FNS' Minneapolis computer center keeps track of important information on the 230,000 retailers authorized to accept food stamps. This information includes basic identifying information, estimated sales activity, investigative history, and amount of coupon redemptions. RCAP also keeps track of information on food stamp redemptions as they are processed by banks.

One quarterly report the system generates identifies stores that redeem more than $1,000 each month in food stamps and have twice the average redemptions of a group of stores of similar size. These stores are checked out by the FNS field offices to find out why they have unusually high redemption levels. If the field officers find unexplained irregularities, the stores are referred for investigation by FNS compliance officers.

Several recent developments are helping to streamline this process. To enhance the computer screening by the RCAP system, FNS is developing an error-prone profile—a set of selection criteria to enable the computer to better identify stores likely to violate program rules. This profile will help target investigative efforts.

In addition, the 72 FNS field offices recently have been equipped with microcomputers that allow them to access the RCAP system. Field offices can now enter information on newly authorized stores directly into the Minneapolis system, instead of filling out and mailing a form with the information.

Likewise, they can access historical information about stores' redemption patterns to help them in determining which stores should be referred for investigations.

FNS area compliance offices have also recently been equipped with microcomputers. Workers at the six compliance offices can now electronically enter information about stores being investigated into a system known as the Investigative Field Office Activities Reporting System, or IFOARS, which is also housed in Minneapolis.

When a compliance office gets a case for investigation, the data is entered into IFOARS. The system automatically pulls background on the store being investigated from the RCAP system. The IFOARS computer case record is updated continuously as the investigation proceeds. With the new on-line microcomputers, this is being done faster and more efficiently than ever before.

FNS will soon be testing yet another automated link in this system. Starting this summer, two compliance investigators will begin testing the use of portable computer terminals to keep track of their management information. The size of a briefcase, the computers will be equipped with a keyboard and screen, and will be able to transmit information to the area compliance office microcomputer over telephone lines.

The compliance investigators pose as food stamp shoppers in stores suspected of possible violations, such as selling ineligible items, like cigarettes or alcoholic beverages; buying or selling food stamps; or giving unauthorized amounts of cash as change.

With the portable computers, investigators will be able to transmit daily reports with complete information on the inventory of food stamp coupons used and cash change received in their investigations.

Currently, the 50 investigators spend about 10 percent of their time keeping track of the more than $300,000 in coupons they use each year. Other types of reports—such as details of cases worked on, miles driven, and hours worked—will also be easier with the portable units.

Other steps also improve monitoring

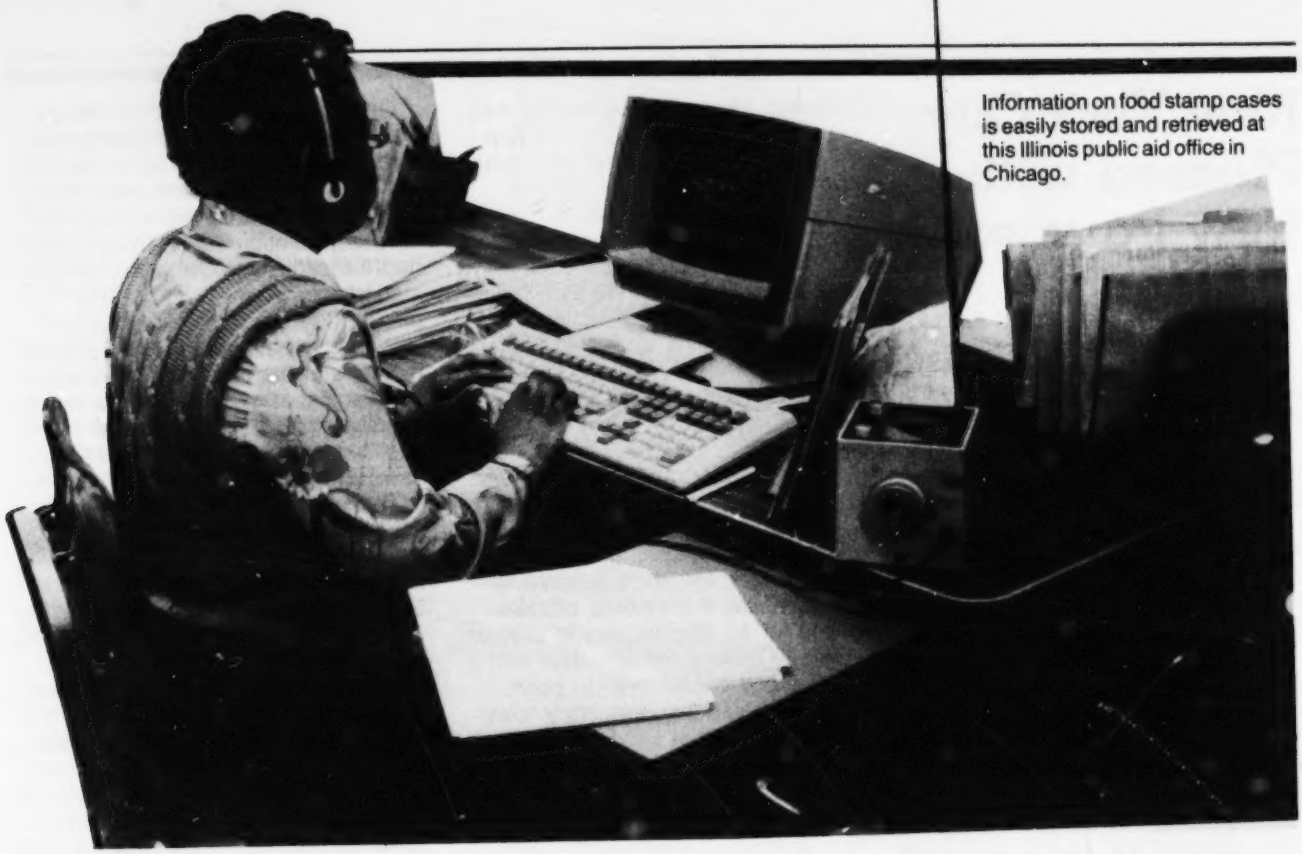
Each year the 230,000 authorized retailers accept about 2½ billion coupons of varying denominations from food stamp participants in exchange for eligible food items. The retailers count and bundle the coupons by denomination in packages of 100 and submit them as part of their regular bank deposit along with a redemption certificate, a form supplied by FNS.

There are about 10,000 financial institutions that accept these deposits and submit them with the redemption certificates and a summary accounting document to one of 37 Federal Reserve banks. About 700,000 forms are used annually to make these transfers.

The Federal Reserve banks count the coupons, pass credits to the financial institutions, check for counterfeit coupons, and destroy the coupons. They, in turn, charge the United States Treasury for coupons redeemed and destroyed, and submit all accounting documents to FNS.

While the coupons are carefully checked by the Federal Reserve banks against the accounting documents submitted by the financial institutions, the amount of the redemption certificates differs from the coupons because of restrictions on how coupons must be bundled for submission.

FNS has improved the accountability of this system through a bank monitoring project developed in 1982 and fully implemented in April 1985. The project changed the redemption



Information on food stamp cases is easily stored and retrieved at this Illinois public aid office in Chicago.

certificate to an easier-to-complete form which could be read by an optical scanner at the Minneapolis computer center. It also changed and improved the flow of paperwork to FNS.

The changes require banks to be stricter about checking the redemption certificates supplied by retailers. This has helped to some extent, says Ray Pugh, deputy administrator for financial management at FNS.

He points out that in fiscal year 1981 banks redeemed $200 million in food stamp coupons that could not be identified with specific retailers. Currently, the gap has dropped to about $40 million. "However," he says, "the system still falls short of being a full-blown accounting system for food stamp redemptions."

To counter that problem, FNS has pulled together a task force made up of seven major banks, the American Bankers Association, the U.S. League of Savings Institutions, the Federal Reserve System, and agency representatives. The task force's goal is to come up with an automated system that would effectively keep track of redemption data and streamline current procedures.

"We are examining approaches that would reduce paper flow, give us an accurate accounting for redemption activity by retailers, cut down the staff workload at the Minneapolis computer center, and apply the technology that is currently available to the government and banking industry," says Pugh.

The task force has carefully documented the redemption process and has considered a number of alternatives for an improved system. The system will be pilot tested and evaluated before being applied on a broad scale.

"While early in the process, the idea has potential for some exciting things," says Pugh. "It's an interim step that fits in between where we are now and a paperless, EBT-like system down the road. It represents something you can do right now to provide a dramatic improvement in food stamp redemption accountability."

Automation is at the forefront

With the agency looking into more sophisticated electronic bank monitoring at the same time it builds an automated network for other kinds of program information, the outlines of Joe Leo's vision of a fully automated electronic flow of information begin to take shape.

"When you look at what our partners in the states are doing in automating, then at what FNS is doing, you can see that automation is clearly at the forefront of our future management of this program," Leo says.

Is it worth the investment in capital to set up an electronic system to run the Food Stamp Program? "I believe unequivocally that automation can return in service and in productivity more than $1.50 to $2.00 for every $1.00 invested," Leo answers.

Automation will not necessarily replace people, he says. It will help them do their jobs better—"working smarter, not harder," as Leo puts it.

"We are always going to need people to make sense out of all this data, to make decisions, to do the interpretation and analysis. Basically, automation frees the worker from mundane bean counting. It extends human capability by providing an electronic tool.

"The agency's mission is to deliver food assistance in an efficient and effective way," Leo says. "The bottom line is that today you really can't do that without automation."

article by Jane Mattern Vachon
photos by Marian Wig, Tino Serrano, and Mary Jane Getlinger

New York City Pleased with New Payment System

Last year, officials of New York City's Department of Income Maintenance issued new photo identification cards to every public assistance and food stamp recipient in New York City. It was the last step in switching from paper documents and manual operations to one of the nation's most automated payment systems, known as Electronic Payment File Transfer (EPFT).

Under the new system, magnetically encoded photo ID cards give bank tellers immediate access to a master file of computerized records that show the amount of food stamps due each client. This eliminates the need for authorization-to-participate (ATP) cards, which clients previously used to obtain their food stamps.

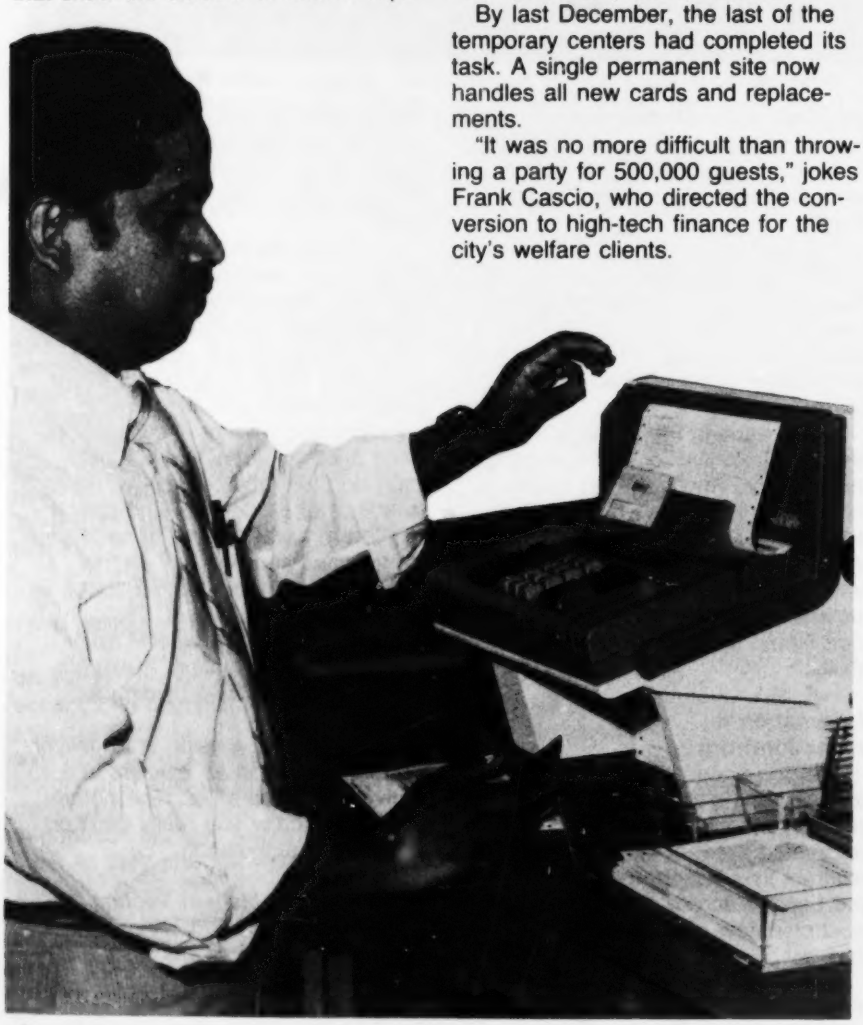
"We disburse public assistance payments and food stamp coupons to more than 500,000 households," says Al Giove, manager of the EPFT system. "It took years of planning and testing to design a system that would meet our needs. The result is a savings of $9 million a year in costs and losses and better service for our clients."

Helped clients with the change

Attention to the human factor is a key aspect of the city's achievement. In automating the system, officials looked for an efficient way to prepare clients to understand and deal with it. The method chosen was to open, staff and equip five temporary "conversion" centers in Brooklyn, the Bronx, Queens, and Manhattan.

By last December, the last of the temporary centers had completed its task. A single permanent site now handles all new cards and replacements.

"It was no more difficult than throwing a party for 500,000 guests," jokes Frank Cascio, who directed the conversion to high-tech finance for the city's welfare clients.



On a blustery day last November, Cascio watched a file of clients, bundled in overcoats, step up to the window at the Brooklyn conversion center where they received training and new identification cards. Cascio visited the centers frequently to make sure clients were moving rapidly through the process.

With conversion nearly completed, the lines at the reception windows were short. At each window, a receptionist verified appointments and checked the status of the client's case on an EPFT terminal.

Those approved for processing were given a routing slip to guide them through each step, pamphlets in Spanish and English describing EPFT, and a calendar of dates on which benefits could be picked up. As clerks encoded and laminated their photo ID's and entered data into the EPFT system, clients watched a 15-minute videotape describing electronic payments.

Because an estimated 35 to 40 percent of the clients are Spanish-speaking, the tape was offered in Spanish as well as English. Entitled "What EPFT Can Do For You," it explained how the new system prevents benefits from being delayed, stolen, or lost in the mail.

It also showed how to present the card for payment at participating banks and check-cashing sites and explained what to do in case the cards were lost or stolen.

Transition made without problems

To convert to the new system, the Department of Income Maintenance assigned clients to centers according to zip code areas. Thus, the changeover took place in orderly stages rather than through simultaneous action citywide. As staff in the neighborhood offices observed the new system in operation, they were eager to come on board.

When a conversion center was ready, the Department sent out letters asking all clients in designated zip code areas to report to their assigned site. Each was given a specific date and time, and every effort was made to ensure that everyone came in.

Those who did not show were personally contacted. Files of elderly and disabled persons were flagged so they would continue to receive benefits until a special team could work with them at home.

In addition to Spanish-language materials, training sessions were provided in other languages such as Vietnamese, Laotian, and Cambodian. In one case, volunteers contacted the center and arranged to act as interpreters for a group of clients from Chinatown.

"We staffed and equipped the centers to handle about 600 clients a day," says Cascio. "Before they opened, I inspected each site and made recommendations to ensure that client flow progressed logically from one step of the process to the next.

"I thought something would have to go wrong, but I was a pessimist," he says. "The plan worked beautifully, and we made the change without a problem."

At a Brooklyn conversion center, food stamp recipients watch a videotape on electronic payments. *Below:* Frank Cascio watches a staff member encode a photo card.

Process is fast and convenient

There are currently 350 banks and check cashers throughout the city authorized to issue food stamps to clients presenting photo ID's. The process is fast and simple for tellers and food stamp recipients alike.

The teller first checks to see that the photo matches, then inserts the card into a terminal. In less than 15 seconds, the machine prints out a voucher showing the client's food stamp entitlement and the next date to report for benefits.

The client signs the voucher as receipt for payment. The teller compares the client's signature to that on the card, and pays the amount due. The computer automatically updates a master file to reflect the payment, making it impossible to get the same benefit at any other outlet.

Each night, the Department of Income Maintenance receives a tape of transactions. "It's a clean and neat system," says Al Giove.

With clients and issuance sites successfully incorporated into the new system, city food stamp managers are beginning to reap the benefits of a long planning process.

According to Giove, automation was recognized very early as the way to achieve a more secure, reliable, and economical public assistance program. He credits leadership in this effort to the vision and support of deputy administrator Martin Burdick, executive deputy administrator Herb Rosenzweig, and former assistant deputy administrator Robin Swank.

With their support, Giove's team worked with contractors to define the Department's needs and to develop an appropriate management system. From November 1981 to November 1983, the current system was tested in a small area of upper West Side Manhattan.

The results of the pilot project were carefully analyzed. A survey showed that 90 percent of the clients who participated preferred the electronic system to the paper one it replaced. They were pleased to get their benefits on time and not have to worry about having them lost or stolen in the mail.

Improvements seen in several areas

By studying the operation and results of this initial application, Department officials continued to improve the system. For instance, when the project expanded citywide, the larger volume of transactions made it cost-effective to switch from a dial-up mode of access to the master file to the faster, leased direct line.

The system was also refined to make it more reliable. A back-up computer was added to take over if the main system fails. The Department also maintains its capability for printing checks and ATP's.

With the system in place, the Department has been able to correct the formidable problems incurred under a paper system. Giove cites the following three main areas of improvement:

Administrative expense. Before automating, the Department had to pay postage on the 600,000 food

stamp ATP's and 1 million public assistance checks it mailed out. Moreover, printing and storing the documents was costly, and additional costs were involved in moving them by armored cars from the warehouse to the data processing center to the post office.

Mail loss and delays. Each month 15,000 people, including 7,000 food stamp recipients, would complain of not receiving their benefits. A complex system was necessary to guard against fraud before benefits could be reissued.

Among other things, this involved setting an 8-day limit on the time in which an ATP could be cashed. The anti-fraud measures were costly to the Department, and the delays in replacing benefits created hardships for clients. Because there is no ATP to be lost or delayed under EPFT, food stamps may be collected until the end of the month in which they are issued, which is far more convenient for clients.

All clients are given a hotline number to report the loss or theft of their ID card. This immediately prevents any further use of the card. Thus, the EPFT system virtually solves the costly problem of duplicate issuances and theft.

Accountability. Under the old system, it took 100 people to manually reconcile food stamp benefits issued and paid and to submit a monthly report to Washington. Now, payments are recorded and reconciled immediately. Staff freed from manual operations are being reassigned to provide better and more rapid service to clients.

That, Giove says, is one of the aspects he likes best about the new system. "It's always a challenge to improve management and save money," he says, "but it is also gratifying to see these same actions translated into better service to people in need."

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article and photos
by Wini Scheffler

Model System For Smaller Counties Tested In Minnesota

"User-friendly" is what food stamp staff in Dakota County, Minnesota, are calling their new automated system. The system, developed jointly by federal, state, and local staff, is especially designed to handle food stamp certification and issuance transactions in small to medium-sized counties.

"It's a great system," says Pam Nolan, computer consultant for the Dakota County Economic Assistance Division. "It does a lot for both workers and managers, and it improves accountability."

Planning began 3 years ago

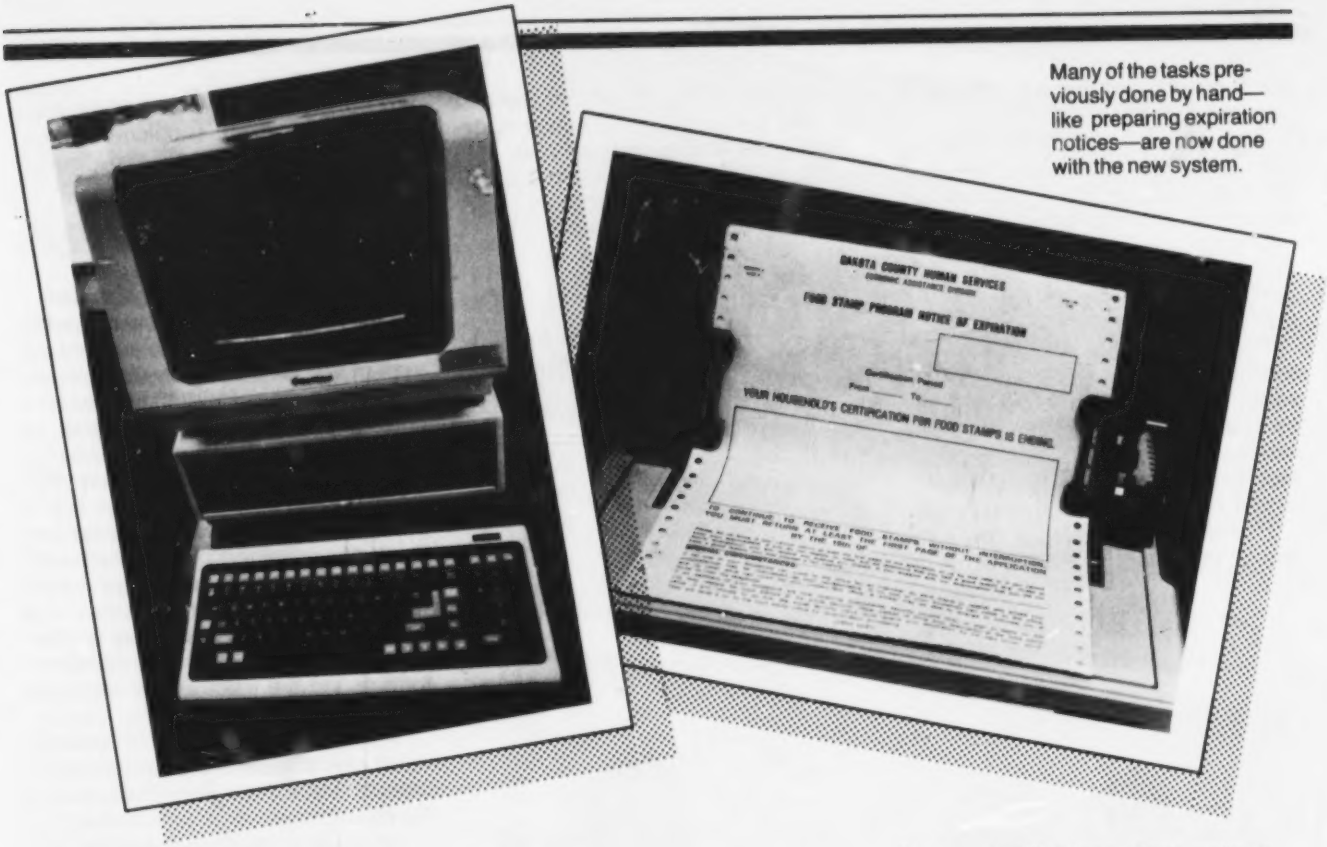
Planning for the system began in 1982 when the Food and Nutrition Service's Washington staff asked the agency's Midwest regional office (MWRO) to develop and test the possibility of implementing an automated food stamp system on a microcomputer.

"We chose Minnesota," says Dave Witt, assistant director of family nutrition programs for MWRO, "because they do not have a statewide automated system for certification and issuance of food stamps. The Minnesota state agency agreed with the idea and chose the Dakota County Economic Assistance Division in West St. Paul as the test site."

Fred Martinowsky, computer specialist with FNS' Information Resources Management Division in Washington, was the project leader. It was his job to search for suitable software—that is to find a database management system that would operate on a microcomputer and that could do multiple tasks using multiple stations.

"This was the first time anyone had tried using microcomputers for the Food Stamp Program," says Martinowsky. "A number of automated systems are being used for food stamp certification and issuance, but these generally are in areas with large caseloads or are statewide operations.

This office in West St. Paul is one of the first in the country to use microcomputers for the Food Stamp Program.


DAKOTA COUNTY HUMAN SERVICES
FOOD STAMP PROGRAM NOTICE OF EXPIRATION
YOUR HOUSEHOLD'S CERTIFICATION FOR FOOD STAMPS IS ENDING.

Many of the tasks previously done by hand—like preparing expiration notices—are now done with the new system.

"There are a number of states that are county-oriented and could use smaller, less expensive systems. Microcomputers cost about 1/20 the amount needed for a mainframe system."

It took Martinowsky 6 months to research and select a database management system. He had to study market surveys, make telephone calls, talk to salesmen and visit some existing mainframe systems. He chose "OPTIMUM" because it would allow several operators to do different tasks at the same time.

Implemented in several stages

In June of 1983, Jeff Tripodi, computer programmer for MWRO, volunteered to work on the overall system design and the detailed programming. Having worked in the Food Stamp Program for 3 years, he had both the skills and the knowledge of program regulations to generate the required output documents.

Computer consultant Pam Nolan, a former Dakota County employee, was instrumental in developing the system. She and Tripodi decided what information would be put in the computer, how the information would be manipulated, and what reports would be generated. They also wrote the user manual.

When the county decided to implement the system, Nolan prepared small group training sessions for Dakota County staff to give an overview of the system and provide information on the input and output documents. She plans to conduct additional training sessions as the need arises.

Martinowsky and Tripodi did the detailed programming, after first mastering the "OPTIMUM" language. The computer system called for approximately 100 program modules.

"Writing the modules was a long, detailed process that involved taking a goal or objective and breaking it down into minute steps to reach the end result," Tripodi explains.

Speeds processing and reporting

The Dakota County system is designed to handle most major food stamp certification and issuance transactions for a maximum of 2,500 cases. As Tripodi explains, the system helps the food stamp staff with almost every step of determining eligibility, calculating benefits, and keeping track of household participation in the program.

"In the area of certification," he says, "the new system can distinguish among new applications, reapplications, recertifications, desk reviews, and corrections.

"For households that are eligible, the system can figure out the proper food stamp allotment, create a household record for storage and retrieval on the automated database, and issue a notice of decision.

"It can also generate listings authorizing the proper issuance of food stamps on both a daily and monthly basis, store all information previously maintained on Household Issuance Record (HIR) cards, and meet state and federal reporting requirements.

"Finally, it can generate statistical reports and notices based on information stored on the database. Its potential in this area is considerable."

Special form used for data

In processing applications or updating records, food stamp staff use what is called a "turn-around document." This two-part form is divided into five major sections: household, income, shelter, allotment, and household members. Areas involving allotment calculations are highlighted.

"During either an interview or a desk review," says Nolan, "the financial worker ensures that the food stamp application, the household report form or the change report form

are complete and that all verification requirements have been met.

"The worker transfers information from the food stamp application to the food stamp case information turn-around document. In the instance of an update, the financial worker uses the monthly report form to revise a turn-around that already exists for that case."

The worker keeps the bottom portion of the turn-around document and sends the top portion to the data entry operator, who keys the information into the terminal. This information either establishes a new household record or updates an existing record.

The system generates a new turn-around document and a notice of decision, which become part of the case file. Another copy of the notice of decision goes to the client, with all standard information pertaining to clients' rights and responsibilities printed on the reverse side.

Issuance log produced daily

At the end of the day, the system produces a mail issuance log, which lists the household's name, address, benefit amount, and coupon book denomination. This goes to the accounting department, which will use it the following day to manually issue food stamps.

After the accounting staff issue the coupons, they key the date, the amount, and the category of issuance (monthly, prorated, supplemental, restored, replacement, or retroactive benefit) into the terminal. This updates the household record.

The system is designed to accommodate expedited payments to households that qualify for this special service because of severe need. "In these cases," says Nolan, "the system will print a notice of decision while the recipient waits. The recipient can take his notice of decision to the accounting department and pick up his first food stamps immediately."

Speed and accuracy are two big pluses for the new system, according to county managers. "Our cases are consistent and accurate," says Judy Bergevin, a Dakota County office services supervisor, "because all the information is provided in a standard format, and the calculations are done by computer."

"It will be just wonderful when it is in full operation," says financial assistance supervisor Betty Bruber. "Definitely, it will be a timesaver.

"Although it may take longer to process first-time cases, our case documentation will be much more complete and desk reviews or updates will require less than half the time it takes with the manual system. Our computer forms are designed to get the right answers, so our level of errors is reduced."

Final tests are nearly complete

The system is now in the second stage of what's called "parallel testing." In the first stage, 100 cases were loaded and processed both manually and by computer. Many problems were worked out. In the second stage, 500 cases are being processed both manually and by computer. Dakota County staff expect their automated system to be completely in place by the end of April.

For more information on the Dakota County system, contact:
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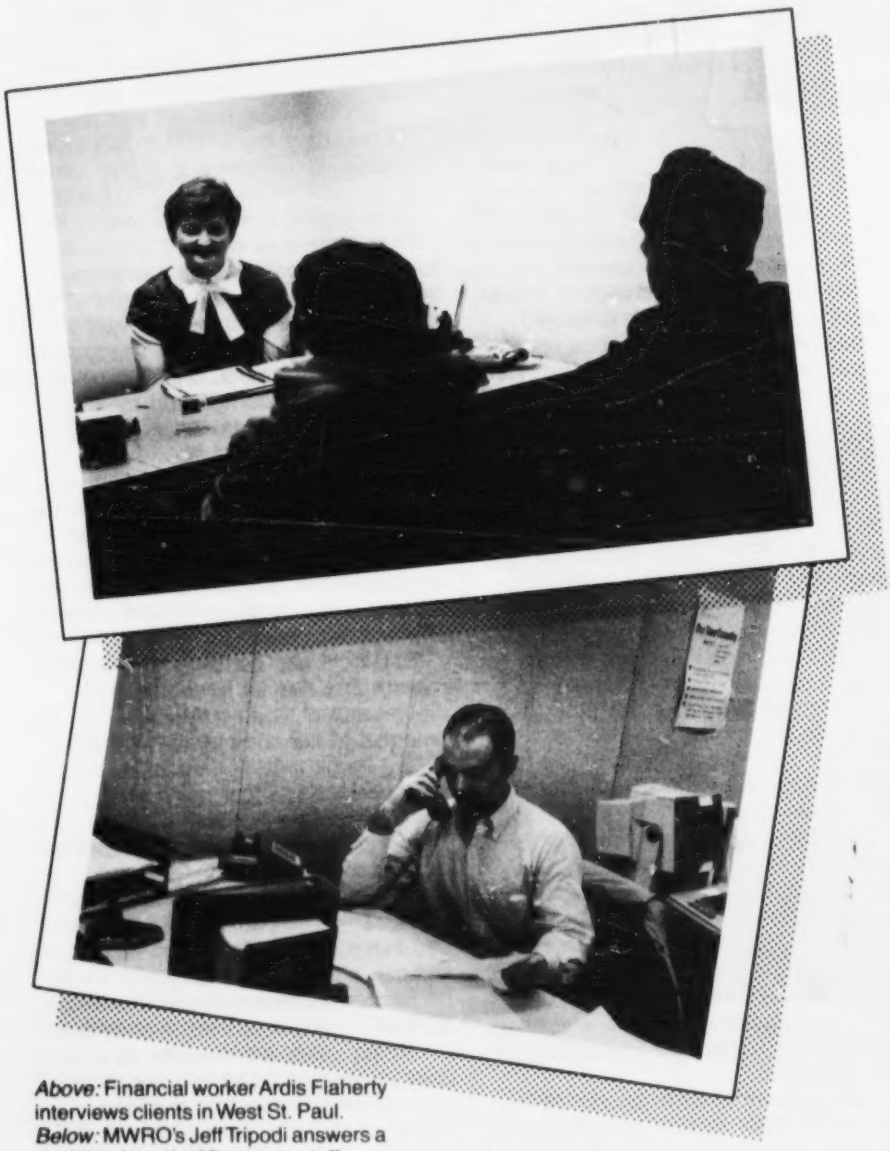
article by Mary Jane Getlinger
photos by Mary Jane Getlinger and Mary Jo Stauner



Above: Financial worker Ardis Flaherty interviews clients in West St. Paul.
Below: MWRO's Jeff Tripodi answers a question from the Minnesota staff.

Wyoming WIC Staff Pioneer New Approach

The new portable computers cut down on waiting time for mothers and children.

Although Wyoming was the fiftieth state to join the WIC program, it has become a pioneer in computerizing program operations. Working closely with local staff, state managers have developed the first on-line computer data bank system specifically for WIC needs.

WIC—officially known as the Special Supplemental Food Program for Women, Infants, and Children—is operated by state and local health agencies in cooperation with USDA's Food and Nutrition Service (FNS).

It serves low-income pregnant and breastfeeding women, infants, and children up to age 5 who are determined to be at risk because of nutrition-related health problems and inadequate diet. Participants receive nutrition education along with specially prescribed food packages.

Wyoming has served more than 33,000 mothers and children since the program began there. "That's very good in a state with less than half a million people," says Wyoming's WIC director Terry Williams.

System's benefits already evident

Williams—under whose guidance the new computer system was developed—sees multiple benefits already accruing from the system, including an estimated $20,000 annual savings in operating costs. Within a 3-year period, the system will pay for itself. It also serves participants more efficiently and has added to the skills of the professional and paraprofessional staff.

"We're always looking for ways to increase efficiency and stretch our dollars," Williams says. "We decided computerizing offered the most potential to help us maximize our program."

Wyoming's first task was determining cost-effectiveness. There are WIC clinics all over the state—in public health departments, mobile trailers, and even a church basement. The largest clinic is open 5 days a week, but staff members travel to smaller clinics at some sites just once or twice a month.

"Our nutritionist in the Big Horn Basin, for example," Williams says, "runs about four clinics a week at a minimum of three different locations."

The old way of doing things was cumbersome and time-consuming. Local staff used various multi-part forms to record data on each participant and each visit. These forms had to be mailed to the state office, where the data then had to be keypunched, put on a disk, and taken to the bank for entry into its mainframe computer.

The bank prepared the vouchers that participants use to purchase WIC foods at authorized grocery stores. These were done in batches and sent to the state office, which passed them on to the local agencies for distribution to participants.

Turn-around time was as long as 2 months. At least 15 percent of the vouchers had to be voided because participants had moved or their food prescriptions had changed. About 5 to 8 percent of the records had form or keypunch errors, causing more delays.

Portable units were recommended

Interested in streamlining the process, the state staff consulted their data processing bank, American National Bank in Cheyenne, which recommended using portable computers. With portable computers, the local staff would be able not only to speed certification and simplify record-keeping, but also issue vouchers on the spot.

Because of the way Wyoming's WIC program is set up, the portable units had to meet several criteria. They had to be light, so nurses and nutritionists could carry them. They had to be durable, since they would be loaded into the back seat of a car and taken from clinic to clinic several times a week, and they had to be IBM-compatible to interface with Wyoming's existing equipment.

The state selected COMPAQ portable units, which weigh only 33 pounds. Most of the state's 13 WIC projects and 32 clinics sites use the standard COMPAQ portable, but projects in Cheyenne, Casper, and Fremont County/Riverton/Lander use COMPAQ PLUS units because of their need for expanded storage capacity.

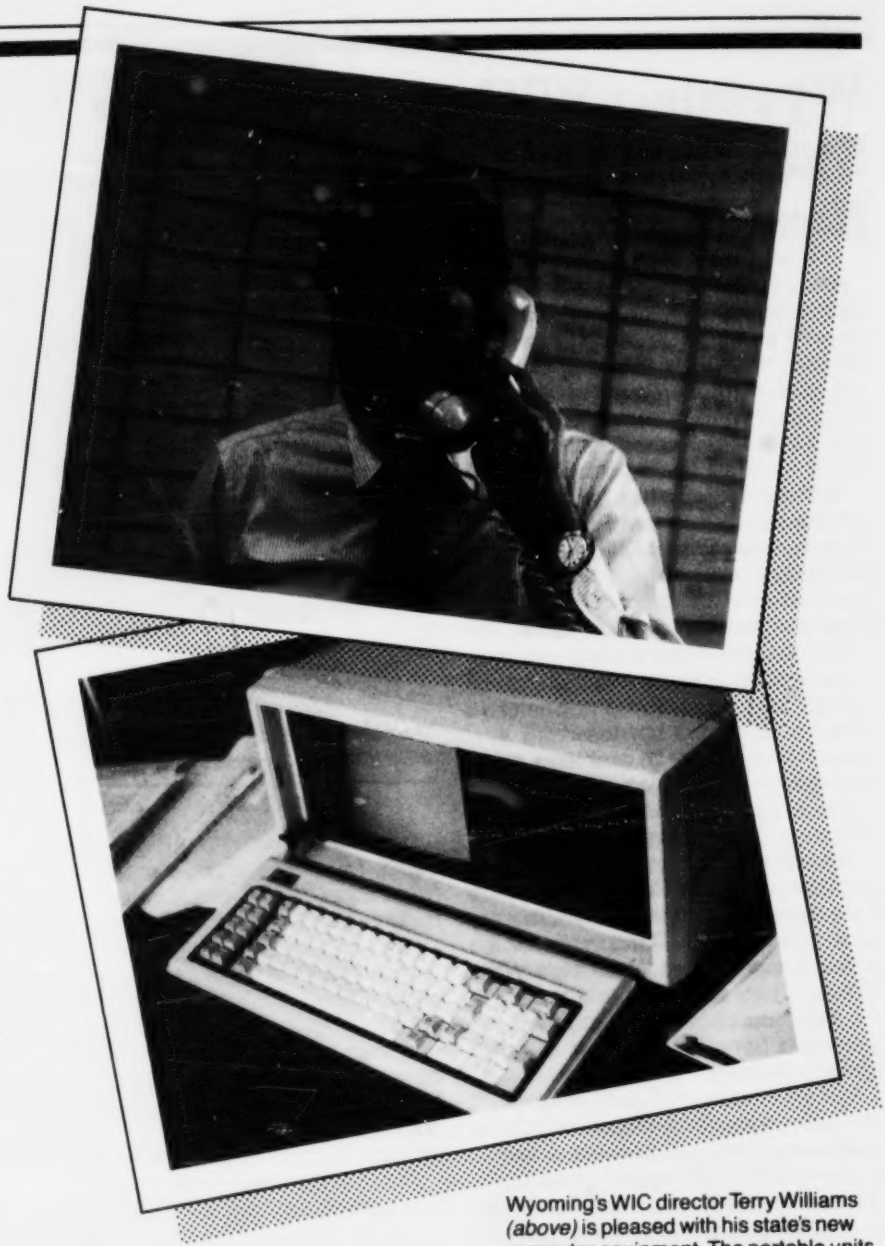
Costs were less than estimated

The hardware and software for Wyoming's system cost less than $100,000. The system came in at less than the estimated cost, thanks to a drop in the cost of microcomputer equipment over the period of the project.

Ten standard COMPAQ portables, three COMPAQ PLUS units, and another unit at the contract bank cost $55,124. This compares well with the original 3-year, lease-to-buy estimate of $55,044 for only 11 projects. State office equipment was projected at $14,850, but cost only $9,160. Programming—including the time of a full-time contract programmer—added another $18,115.

Installation costs were also low. The computers are secured in specially designed desk cabinets, constructed of heavy wood with two locks and storage for vouchers and computer paper. The state's carpenter built the first one from a staff design, and local agencies have contracted for more at $250 each.

After each workday, computer equipment is locked into the cabinet, but it remains "live" so data can be automatically forwarded to or received from Cheyenne.



Wyoming's WIC director Terry Williams *(above)* is pleased with his state's new computer equipment. The portable units are light and easy for staff to use.

Computers help in many ways

The computers help the local staff with many tasks formerly done by hand. In addition to using the units to issue vouchers and certify and recertify participants, local agencies also use the units to: correct participants' records; select food package prescriptions; enter information directly into the state's master file; transfer information from the master file; and print out data when written materials are needed.

Daily reports—including numbers of individuals certified and recertified, changes, and vouchers issued—help the state staff measure work load, calculate obligations, and monitor local agencies.

The new system also improves efficiency by reducing the amount of time participants spend in the clinics and by providing tighter control measures. The new automated voucher issuance system is a big time saver—vendor-specific vouchers can be prepared and printed at any time. Terminals can also be programmed to prepare postcards informing participants of their status.

A new programming phase will include software to issue late voucher pick-up notices, recertification notices, and right-to-fair-hearing letters. Eventually, it can also be used for word processing, diet analysis, and other office uses.

Portables units have a built-in Hayes modem and use Hayes software for communication. The COMPAQ is linked to a Burroughs 2930 mainframe computer at the bank and to the State's IBM PC-XT, using a software package called Masterlink. Each local agency project area has its own Okidata printer for on-site voucher issuance.

Clients and staff benefit

When floods in Cheyenne put their COMPAQ PLUS unit down for a day, the manual issuance of checks was a reminder of "the bad old days" for Lynn Van Raden, Laramie County nutritionist in charge of that clinic. She said they'd never be able to serve their present workload on an ongoing basis without computerization.

In terms of dollars and cents, Wyoming has reduced its banking costs already. Prior to adoption of the new system, bank charges for data support and voucher handling were $85,000 per year for approximately 7,400 participants—an average cost of 96 cents per participant per month.

This year's contract with American National calls for an expenditure of $65,000, representing roughly 73

Here, registered nurse Debbie Barnes *(left)* and secretary Rose Maez *(right and above)* issue WIC vouchers to participants at the Cheyenne clinic.

cents for participant per month.

"We're providing better service to our participants," says Williams. "There are fewer wrong checks being provided."

An added advantage is enhanced job skills for professional and paraprofessional staff. Since WIC is the state's first program in the public health sector to be computerized, county staff feel good about acquiring related job skills. They now have more flexibility for future career development and upward mobility.

Formerly, nurses and nutritionists had to do a tremendous amount of paperwork. With recordkeeping and check preparation now automated, they're free of those chores.

"This has allowed us to reemphasize why we hired them," says Williams. "We figure it gives them an additional 5 minutes per participant for counseling, education, nutritional assessment, and actual eye contact."

New staffing patterns tried

Wyoming is now experimenting with different staffing patterns within the program. Traditionally, the clinic teamed a nutritionist, a nurse, and a secretary to work with participants. Now there are two models at work.

In the first, the nutritionist provides full service to participants with secretarial support only 1 day per week to process data from the microcomputer and generate print-outs. This pattern works well with sparse populations since the nutritionist can cover several communities per week.

In the second model, which applies to larger communities and caseloads, a nurse and nutritionist work together, with 1 day for the secretary to process data gathered the other 4 days.

Wyoming is especially proud of having computerized its WIC program within the available federal grants. No special money was made available for the project. The bank trained state office staff, and state people trained field staff.

"Even though none of our people had computer expertise," Williams says, "they have been trained to fully use the COMPAQ for our program needs in about 12 hours."

He says that any local agency considering such a system is not looking at a large economic investment. A smaller agency, such as an Indian agency, should be able to implement something similar for a lot less. And a new staff person—at the end of 2 days' training—can go out and operate a clinic.

Changes can still be made

Should Wyoming ever decide to go to a totally in-house system or use another contractor or bank, the software is adaptable. But Wyoming staff are pretty happy with their new system now.

"Computers have enabled us to make our operation virtually paperless, freeing up our professional staff for more meaningful work," Williams says.

After all, why bury people in paper?

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article and photos by Joanne Widner

Workshops Help School Lunch Managers in Pennsylvania

Jack Koser brags about the fact he spends 90 percent of his workday in school cafeterias. What else, you might ask, would a school food service director be doing?

"Paperwork," says Koser. "There's just so much recordkeeping in this business that it can keep you from where you really should be—in the lunchroom finding out what does and doesn't work with the kids."

The way out of the paperwork dilemma, he says, requires neither a staff of thousands nor Merlin the Magician. It takes a little knowledge of computers and a willingness to try new things.

Koser, who is school food service director for the Lower Merion School District in Pennsylvania, became fascinated by computers and their application in the food service industry when he worked at the University of Pennsylvania.

Software was available at the Ivy League school that could instantly precost banquets, automatically develop recipe measurements for meals for from 5 to 5,000 people, and accurately keep inventory of every food service item from paper products to condiments.

When he left Penn for a career in school food service, Koser was determined to have as much computer sophistication as he could working for him.

"With the knowledge I brought with me, I could see that school food service, as a profession, was years behind in the use of computers," the district director says. "And I felt we all needed to get more involved."

Workshops offer chance to help

The chance to share this technical knowledge with his peers came last year when he was asked to assist with a series of workshops on computers sponsored by USDA and the Pennsylvania Department of Education.

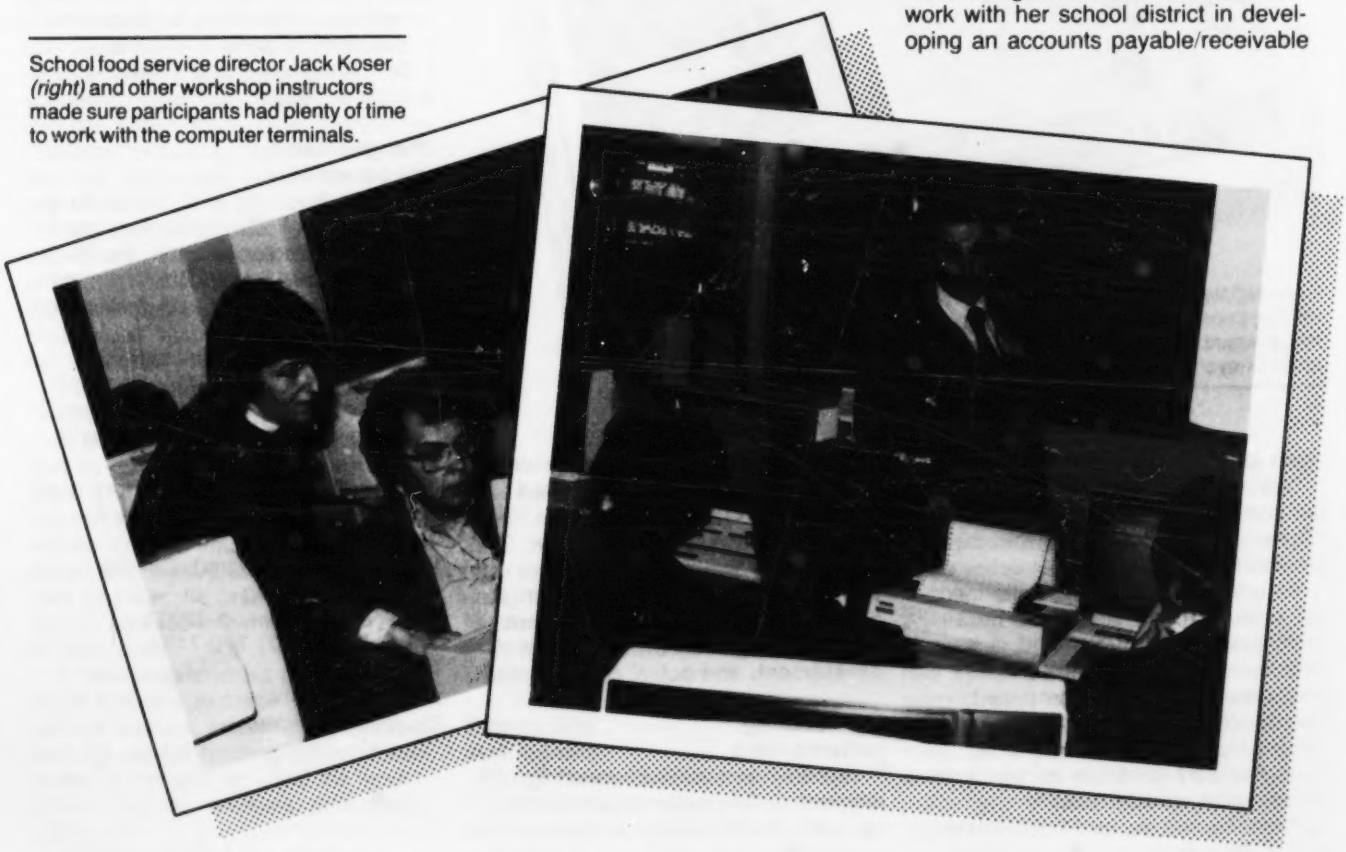
"The state wanted to get more schools involved in computers," Koser says. "It was a great opportunity not only for me but for all who were able to take advantage of the courses."

According to teachers and students alike, the workshops were an unqualified success. The sessions were both basic in design and relative to the needs of the participants. Small classes allowed for hands-on training, and software included programs for menu management, financial statements, and inventory control.

The combination maintained interest not only through the course, but also when students returned to their schools.

Betty Bass, school food service director for the Lackawanna Trail School District in the northeastern part of the state, says she had little computer training before taking the course.

"Once we got our hands on the computer and saw it wouldn't bite," she says, "I think the whole class found it quite easy to learn." Since the training, Bass has been able to work with her school district in developing an accounts payable/receivable



School food service director Jack Koser *(right)* and other workshop instructors made sure participants had plenty of time to work with the computer terminals.

system on the district's main computer.

"With the disks from the course, I'll be able to do a lot more when I get my own terminal," she says. "And with the time I save, I'll be able to get to my five buildings more often."

Other managers also see benefits

Irene Metzger, food service director at the Loyalsock Township School District in Williamsport, says while some of the course programs were inappropriate for her small district, she found the training to be a great asset.

"It really hit the target," she says. "I'd recommend it for anyone in school food service."

After taking the course, the Williamsport director was able to get an inventory program for government commodities written for her district. "I went to the computer teacher about putting together a program, but he couldn't work in any free time," Metzger says. "So he made it a student assignment." The program is now in place and saves her 1 day's manual work a month.

One director who bought the computer concept lock, stock, and barrel was Ed Gordon, head of food service at the Bensalem Township School District in suburban Philadelphia.

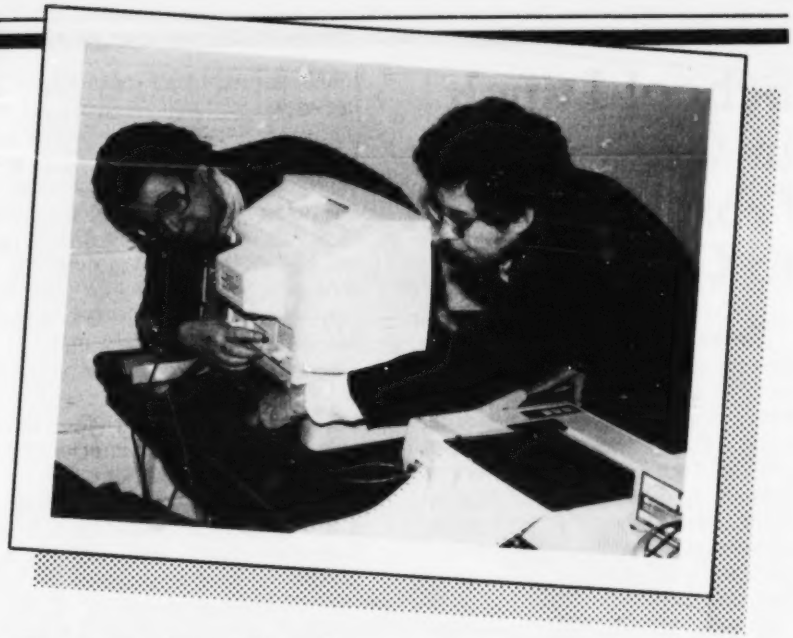
"I'm sold," he says. "I've got a PC (personal computer) here in my office. And, I've bought an entire food service software package along with 16 hours of training time."

Gradually, Gordon says, he is bringing all facets of his operation into the electronic age. And the effort is paying dividends.

"Last summer, it took me 4 weeks to build an inventory file of about 800 items," he says. "Before the school year is half over, I'll easily make that time back."

Another computer time saver, Gordon has found, is in the area of the daily accounting of meals and money and periodic tabulations. "I used to have a journal that required writing in numbers each day for each school," he says. "With the computer, it's much quicker and cleaner, and you don't have to worry about errors in the totals."

Gordon credits the workshops with fueling his interest in computer technology. "I think what did it was the fact that the course dealt specifically with areas we could relate to," he says. "The people who put the workshops together came up with a good concept."



Workshops were carefully planned

Penn State University's College of Human Development was awarded the contract for the three 2-day sessions, entitled "Using Computers to Improve School Food Service Management."

The purpose of the workshops, according to Carolyn Lambert, assistant professor in Penn State's Food Systems Administration, was to acquaint school food service personnel and business officials with the computer and its application in their workplace.

She says most managers in business administration are in need of computer knowledge. School food service is a good example of a profession that must use, reuse, and store large quantities of information.

"The computer would appear to be such a logical purchase that every school food service department would have one," the professor says. But many school districts do not use electronic technology in school food service.

"In some cases, there is a reluctance to try new systems," she explains. "And there are many times when people are willing but the training is either too technical or inappropriate."

The premise of the Penn State workshops was that participants had little or no knowledge of computers or their application to the school lunch program.

Sessions held in three locations

Sessions were held in three locations—eastern, western, and central sections of the state. They were limited to 50 people per session so that everyone could have enough personal attention from instructors as well as time working with the computer.

"We had less lecture time and more participation with the terminal," Koser says. "People quickly became more at ease and less apprehensive."

Another key ingredient to the success of the workshops was the instructional software that consisted of programs specific to food service operations—inventory, daily cost sheets, and a recipe file. These programs were given to participants in diskettes ready to use.

Koser says he hopes the workshops and the programs will serve as a base that will eventually lead to such things as inventories, cost analyses, financial data, recipes and nutrient evaluations being generated instantly by computers.

"The workshops got the awareness to 150 people," he says. "It's a start."

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article and photos
by Joe Dunphy

School Lunch in Gainesville: From Cash Box to Computer

For many people in Gainesville, Florida, GATORS means only one thing—the University of Florida sports teams. But for school lunch managers, GATORS means Gainesville Automated Terminal Online Resource System, a state-of-the-art computer project that spells relief from paperwork while providing improved accountability for the school lunch program.

In 1981, the Alachua County school board decided to make better and more extensive use of computers throughout the 30-school district. County food service director, Bronna Godwin, who has recently retired, welcomed the chance to modernize school lunch operations.

"In looking at our business systems," says Godwin, "we realized they were old fashioned and unreliable." All monies for the school breakfast and lunch programs were collected in tin cash boxes and participation counts were tallied as hash marks on a form.

"We had a totally manual system. We knew we needed a change because we were handling more money than many companies in the area. We were running a $5 million business out of tin boxes."

Special terminals installed in schools

The first area Godwin addressed was cash collection and accountability for meals served. "Accurate meal counts are important," she says, "because they determine federal reimbursements." After reviewing a study on how to best use available computer technology, she decided to install point-of-sale cash register terminals in each of the 30 schools.

As Godwin explains, the terminals are placed at the end of the food line like ordinary cash registers. As children move through the line, the cashier at the terminal keys in information on the sale—for example, whether the meal is served free, at reduced-price, or at full price to students. Information on a la carte sales and meals served to adults is also keyed in.

Each terminal has a modem attached, which allows the terminal to communicate through a separate, direct phone line to a host mainframe computer located at the school board office. The food service staff and school board accountants view data from the schools on terminals that are linked to the mainframe.

Many chain restaurants use this same type of setup since it provides accurate accounting at the point of sale with appropriate checks and balances for cash collection.

A computer program, developed as a part of GATORS, transfers data from the schools' terminals to the mainframe host computer. The mainframe computer "polls" each school terminal at night through a telecommunications software program that retrieves data on school lunch activities that day.

System is fast and accurate

Electronic polling improves accuracy over manual keypunching since data is punched in only once at the point of sale. And it is faster—it would take one person almost 8 hours to keypunch one day's data that is now transmitted from all schools in less than an hour over phone lines.

If there is a telephone transmission problem with a school, data can be keypunched into the mainframe computer. While this takes longer than telephone transmission, it is still much faster than the old manual system.

Persuading lunch managers to change to a new computerized cash collection system wasn't easy. "I had managers break out in hives during computer training because they were used to their tin boxes and forms," laughs Godwin.

In the first year, there was a fear of dealing with technology. "The managers were initially worried about the in-

Five years ago, Alachua County schools were using tin cash boxes, like this one, to collect school lunch monies. Thanks to Bronna Godwin, all 30 schools now have sophisticated computerized cash registers.

stant feedback we had on their school lunch data the next morning," says Godwin. But due to the proper atmosphere and support, the GATORS system has been accepted well. "Now you can't find anyone who would even think about going back to the old system," Godwin says.

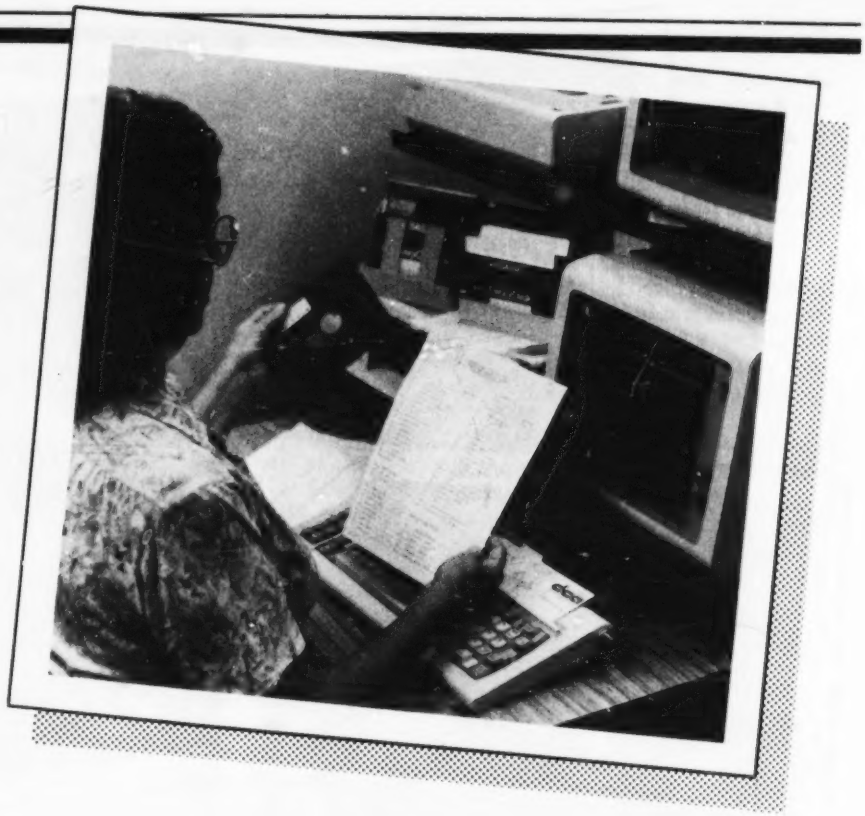
One of the benefits of GATORS is that managers now have more time for food and employee supervision rather than duplication of clerical work. In Gainesville, school lunch managers can save up to 6 hours a week of their time and almost 3 hours of their employees' time a week.

At one school, 30 forms a week have been eliminated thanks to automation. USDA's Office of Inspector General audited GATORS and found that it was effective in gathering and summarizing school lunch data.

"The terminals also help speed students through the lunch lines since item costs are programmed right in," says Godwin.

Even though the GATORS computer network is extremely sophisticated, the key to its success is the simplicity, accountability and flexibility built in. Most schools use only one terminal. "We put an additional terminal in a school only if it is needed due to an additional food line," Godwin explains.

Lunch data from the secondary terminal at a school is punched into the primary register at the end of the lunch period. All data is stored in the primary register until the host computer polls it that night.



Reports help managers plan

As a part of GATORS, management reports that include information on participation, food costs, and labor costs are provided to each school manager. This enables school lunch managers to compare their costs with other schools' costs and to evaluate ways to better manage their programs.

"We want each school food manager to see how much labor and food cost is involved with the meal. With this information, we're challenged to see if we can do it for less," says Godwin.

Management reports also help managers evaluate the expense involved in sophisticated kitchen equipment. "I think managers would be less prone to want some of the bells and whistles on equipment if they were aware there is a direct charge back to their programs.

"We want them to ask whether we should pay for the bells and whistles or put this money back into higher quality food for the students. There are many decisions that can be made and attitudes than can be adjusted based on the information that our reports provide," says Godwin.

GATORS works with the system each school has in place to protect the identity of those students who receive free and reduced-price meals, about 50 percent of those served in Alachua County.

Cashiers identify the type of meal by a code on meal tickets or roster of students. "We want the food service program to be a satisfying and positive part of the school day. We don't want anyone to feel different," says Godwin.

For paid lunches, Godwin encourages students to prepay by offering a discount if at least five meals are paid in advance. "Parents have picked up on this incentive, which helps us plan our food needs better while saving students money," she says.

One way Godwin keeps cost to a minimum is the use of USDA-donated commodities. "We use all the USDA commodities that we can since it can really cut our costs. I encourage my managers to be innovative in utilizing the donated foods," she says.

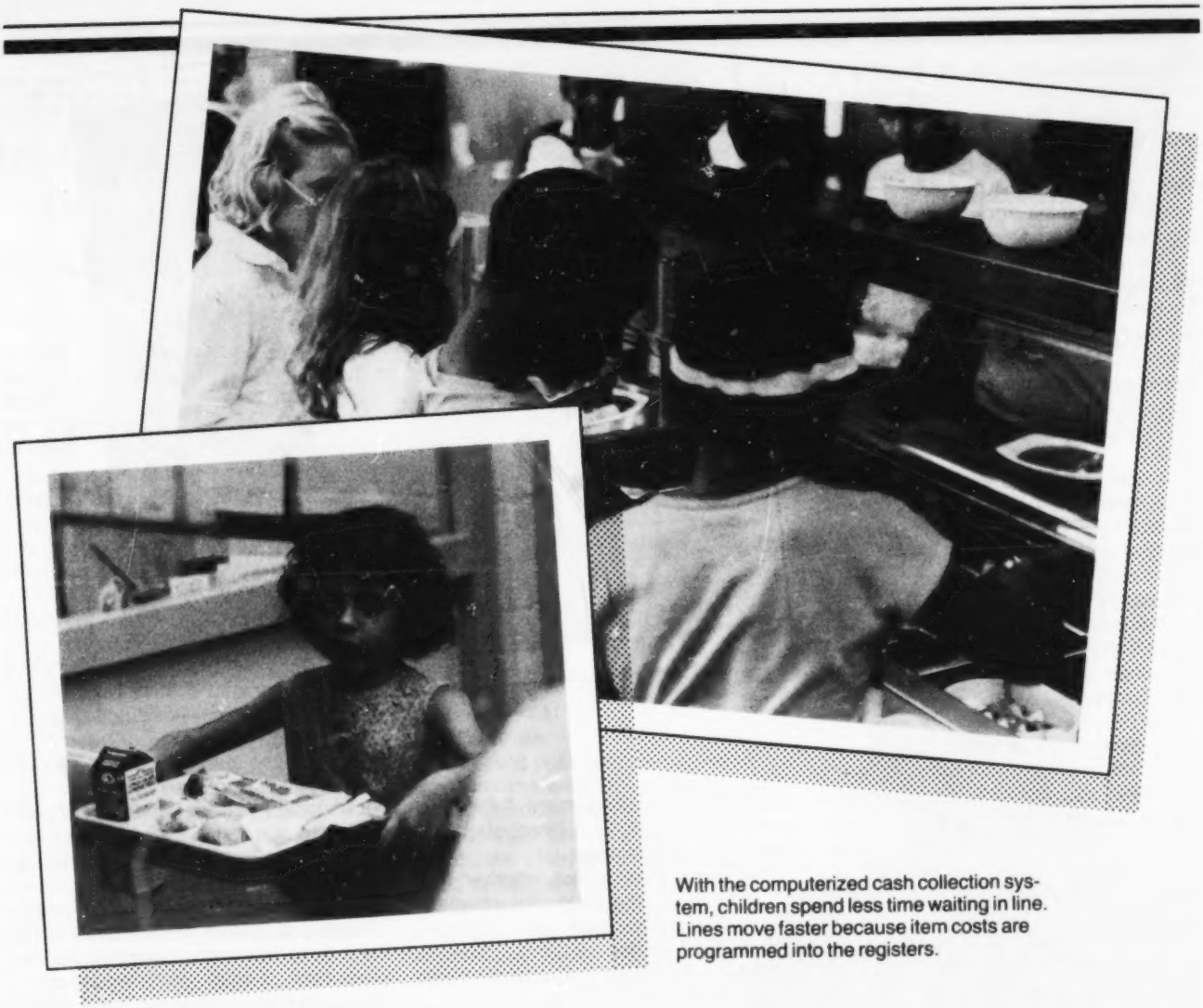
The county has computerized the inventory of USDA commodities, making it easy for lunch managers to keep track of what foods they're using, what they have on hand, and what they need to order.

The change was worth the effort

From the start, Godwin was convinced that computerizing the lunch program was worth the effort and financial commitment it required. The county had the option of buying or leasing the computer equipment. They decided to buy the terminals for the schools—postponing some kitchen equipment purchases to pay for them—and lease the telephone modems.

"We wanted to show the school lunch managers our commitment to this project through our purchase of the terminals," says Godwin. "When you lease computer equipment, people sometimes think that it will be replaced or taken out if problems come up. We were dedicated to changing to the best technology available."

In deciding how to automate their lunch programs, Godwin suggests



With the computerized cash collection system, children spend less time waiting in line. Lines move faster because item costs are programmed into the registers.

schools evaluate their needs carefully. "A system has to fit the needs of people and the priorities of that particular location," she says. Due to the expense involved in changing to computers, a system like GATORS may be best suited for those school districts that nee to automate or have obsolete equipment.

Before automating her own program, Godwin spent time looking into how computers were helping other food service people. She feels school lunch managers can learn a lot from private industry.

"We have to look at what people in private industry—for instance the fast food chains—have developed for inventories and sales to see if that is a need we have," she says.

County program is now a model

Harold Blanton, state food and nutrition director, is encouraging other Florida districts to adopt the GATORS system. "We are hopeful that many school systems will take advantage of this technology. At this time, around 15 counties plan to use all or part of the model," says Blanton.

Among the school systems that are implementing or are interested in GATORS are Dade County (Miami), Duval County (Jacksonville), and in Georgia, Atlanta. Alachua County staff have held a number of seminars on GATORS technology for other school districts.

GATORS is part of FIRN (Florida Information Resource Network) that will link all Florida school districts, universities, and the state education office later this year. This will allow computers to transfer funds for school food service throughout the state.

Alachua County is already sending school lunch participation reports to the state office through FIRN, which allows quicker reimbursement of funds.

GATORS has given Gainesville a more effective school lunch program today. Tomorrow it may be a management information system that is used in school lunch programs throughout the country.

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article and photos
by Kent Taylor

Statewide Network Simplifies School Lunch Management In Maryland

In Maryland, a new statewide computer network is making life easier for school lunch managers. The network links the state education agency, which administers the National School Lunch Program, with every school district in the state.

Now, instead of having to prepare long and complicated written reports for reimbursement and other purposes, school staff simply key the information into the computer terminal installed in their offices and send it electronically to the state office.

Maryland is one of the first states in the country to go full steam ahead in setting up a total network of technological communications with its local education authorities (LEA's).

Managers like the new system

Preliminary work on the system began in 1981 when the state contracted with the Center for Educational Research and Development at the University of Maryland to design, develop, and test an automated data processing system for both the child nutrition and commodity distribution programs.

In 1983, the state won approval from FNS' Mid-Atlantic regional office to spend $166,000 in state administrative expense funds on the project. Within a year, there was a computer network between the state and all 24 school districts. Schools have not only welcomed the computer equipment installed by the state, they have also added to it with purchases that increase their computer capabilities.

Joan Weatherholtz, who directs the education support service branch for the state department of education, is sold on the new system. "It has greatly simplified communications," she says, "enabling the state agency to gather and process information quickly and accurately."

According to Robert Cliser, chief of accountability for the branch, the system is also saving money. In the first 6 months of 1985, the computer network saved the state approximately $200,000.

Cliser was convinced from the start that the system would be cost effective and that it would answer an urgent need to improve reporting procedures at both the state and LEA levels.

Developed in several stages

The state is now through its first phase of completion. The principal uses of the system have been to: establish and update data bases of standard information for items such as routine reports; to provide for a rapid exchange of information; and to facilitate reporting and reimbursement processes.

Microcomputers, like this one in Baltimore, link Maryland school districts with the state office.

Among the specific items processed for the child nutrition programs are program agreements with boards of education, overall information on schools and on student applications for free and reduced-price meals, and pertinent information on severe need schools.

The data processing system is used to process requests from LEA's to the state for payment on letters of credit; produce statistical reports for reimbursement; prepare semi-annual financial reports to establish per-meal costs; and monitor operating balances. It also helps make projections used for planning and budgeting.

As Cliser points out, the turnaround time for an LEA's request for payment by the state on a letter of credit used to be about 5 to 8 days. With the computer system, this has been reduced to about 2 days. The turn-around time for sponsors to receive claims payments based on monthly statistical reimbursements has been cut from a maximum of 8 weeks to about 2 weeks, since this report, as well as others, is being automatically edited instead of manually checked.

Information on the commodity program has also been computerized, making it easier for program managers to determine the availability and value of USDA-donated foods and to order bonus commodities.

"This year, phase two is being implemented," Weatherholtz says. "The branch is working with the LEA's to establish an electronic mail system and to develop a program that will replace hands-on processing of applications for free and reduced-price meals."

During the third phase of the project, this year and next, there will be additional programs developed to improve the management of local school food service operations.

Many advantages for local staff

Local school food service managers are benefiting from the system in a number of ways. Stanley Smith, director of school food services for Baltimore County, says he finds the system particularly helpful in submitting routine reports and retrieving information in the proper format.

Baltimore County, which has 146 schools, has expanded the system to set up programs for equipment inventory. "Instead of locating information manually," Smith says, "we now can rapidly retrieve the most specific information, such as how many stoves or kettles there are in any kitchen or what the model numbers are on the ovens." The district's add-ons to date have cost about $5,000.

Don Trumble, director of school food services for Washington County's 42 schools in western Maryland, calls the system "indispensable" and praises the speed and efficiency it provides in handling repetitive tasks.

An example is the county's report on summer school food service. "It used to be difficult to get it out to the state by September 15," he says, "but now we get it out by September 3."

Getting commodities is faster as well. Trumble says he can now order bonus commodities on a screen and have them within approximately 10 days. "Before the system went into operation," he explains, "it took 3 to 5 weeks to process an order." This involved querying the state, waiting for the state to determine if it had the food, then going through the tedious paperwork that was needed. Saving time with these orders is critical in menu planning.

Trumble is pleased with the way the state staff has helped the LEA's put their systems into operation. "They're going at a very rapid rate," he says. "With the electronic mail system established in August, you can leave a message for anyone on the network."

Like Baltimore County, Washington County has added to the basic system. Trumble is especially proud of the plotter machine, which has total graphic capabilities. The additions to the system, including a word processing package, have cost Washington County $4,000.

County and state staff are quick to agree that the costs of automating are worth the results. For a relatively small investment, they've made some big improvements in their programs.

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article by Ellen Lancaster
photo by Larry Rana

Special Project in West Virginia Links State And Federal Offices

Like Maryland, West Virginia is leading the way in automating school lunch program management. In this case, however, the electronic link is between the state department of education and FNS' Mid-Atlantic regional office (MARO) in Trenton, New Jersey.

Working with MARO's financial management staff in a project begun in 1984, West Virginia has automated at the state level all claims reporting for the National School Lunch Program. Claims, requests for payment, and a report known as "FNS-10" (*Report of School Programs Operations*) are now processed with a new computer system developed by MARO.

Prior to completion of this project, state staff manually entered data from local school food authorities on individual spread sheets and processed claims, requests for payment, and reports with pencil, paper, and desk calculator. This was both time consuming and error prone.

"The new system really saves time," says Diane Hill, who has had 8 years of experience preparing these reports in the department of education's internal finance office. "It provides more accurate figures and calculates reimbursements automatically, eliminating math errors."

Information sent via phone hook-up

As the system is set up, monthly data from the 55 county offices and 110 private schools and residential centers is entered into the computer at the state level. The computer generates the FNS-10 report, transmits it by a special telephone hook-up to another computer at the regional office, and updates the state's individual school claims records. It also generates the paperwork needed to reimburse schools for meals served to participating children.

The computer at the regional office generates a printed copy of the FNS-10. Information submitted on it is later verified during routine financial reviews conducted by regional office staff.

Receiving the information electronically saves a great deal of time for the FNS regional office as well as the state. A big advantage for MARO staff is that they do not have to re-key the information into their cash management analysis system. This analysis is used by the region's financial management staff to project funding needs.

Representatives from MARO and West Virginia worked together on setting up the new system, which will serve as a model for other states. Both agencies realized that many of the potential users were inexperienced with computers and that setting up an initial system that was too technical could turn what was once just a manual reporting headache into an electronic nightmare.

For this reason, they kept the system as simple and non-disruptive to current operations as possible. As MARO systems analyst Dennis Martko says, "The major difference between the manual system and the automated system we proposed was that the information would be viewed on a computer screen and people would no longer be working with volumes of paper."

The basic system developed can easily be enhanced as the state agency becomes more proficient in using it.

Also automating in other ways

West Virginia is interested in automating claims processing at the county level and would eventually like to have data entered at the school level. "We are excited about the potential of the system," says Faith Gravenmier, state director of child nutrition programs for West Virginia, "and everyone involved has a positive attitude. In fact, some county offices have already volunteered to pilot test data entry at the county level."

This would provide for complete automation of the system. Staff time and resources needed to produce the monthly reports would all be reduced. Reports could be transmitted in a matter of minutes to the state office and from there, consolidated FNS-10 reports could be prepared and transmitted to the regional office, without having to re-enter the data at the state level.

The next report scheduled for automation at the state level is FNS-44, a report on the Child Care Food Program submitted monthly to the regional office. Other food program reports that may be automated in the future include the quarterly financial status report, and reports required for the state's food stamp and WIC programs.

MARO's immediate goal is to have all states in the region using paperless reporting for the child care and school food programs by the end of 1986 or early 1987. This will involve sharing with other states the technology developed in West Virginia.

Eventual link to Washington

MARO is also working with FNS headquarters staff to connect the regional office directly to Washington, eliminating the need to re-key reports received via computer from state agencies. This will allow complete automation of the reporting process from the state to the region to the national office.

At every step in the process, paperless reporting eliminates opportunities for errors. It also saves staff time, paper, and filing space.

As Ron Koushel, MARO's director of financial management, says, paperless reporting will eventually make "hard copy" reporting obsolete. West Virginia's new system is a big step in that direction.

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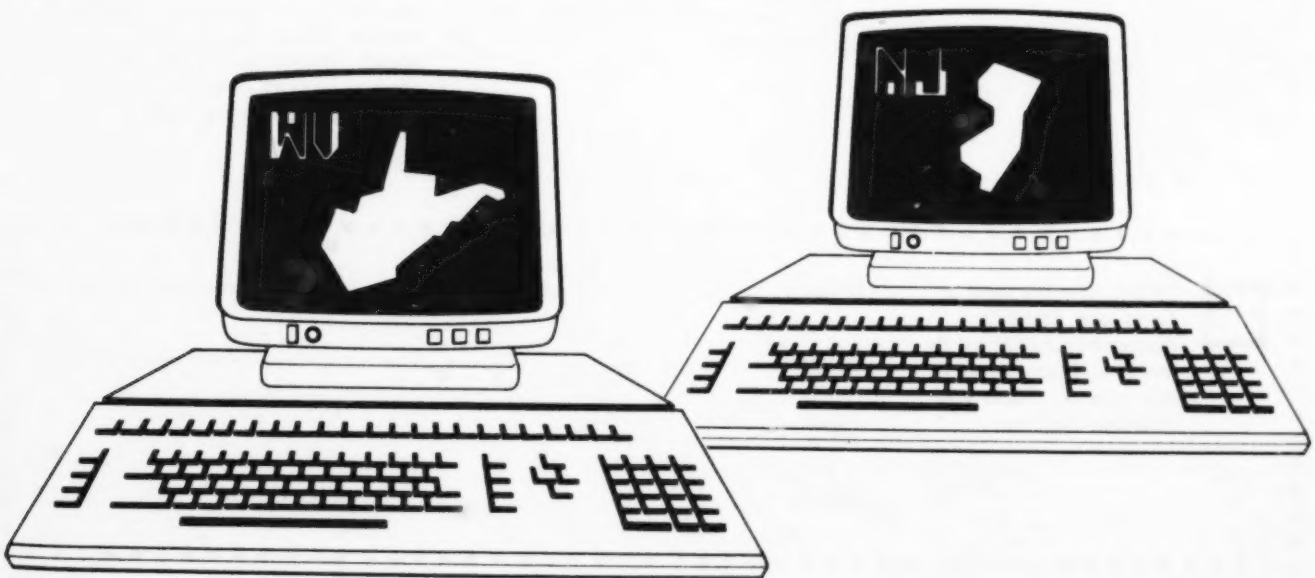
article by Carol Savage



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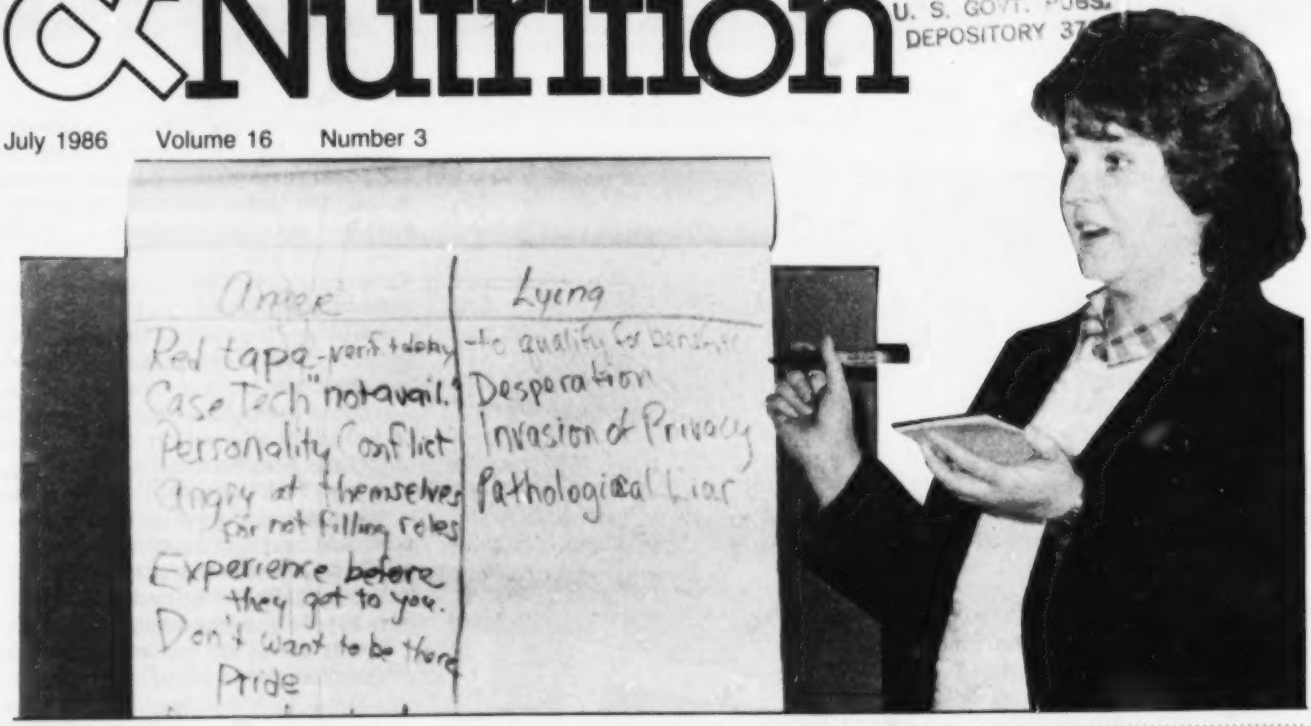

Focusing on Training

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FNIC FNIC FNIC

FNIC Offers Variety of Services...

If it's your job to help get food to kids, or help them learn about nutrition and health, then you probably know about FNIC. If you don't, you should.

FNIC is the Food and Nutrition Information Center, a national repository and lending library that contains print and audiovisual materials on food service management, nutrition education, human nutrition, and consumer education. It's an excellent place to start if you are planning a training program, looking for educational materials, or simply need information.

FNIC was originally set up in 1971 by USDA's Food and Nutrition Service (FNS) as a resource center for school food service personnel seeking to upgrade their skills and knowledge. Today FNIC is officially part of the National Agricultural Library in Beltsville, Maryland. To assure the full range of FNIC services to people working with food and nutrition programs, FNS continues to provide supplemental funding.

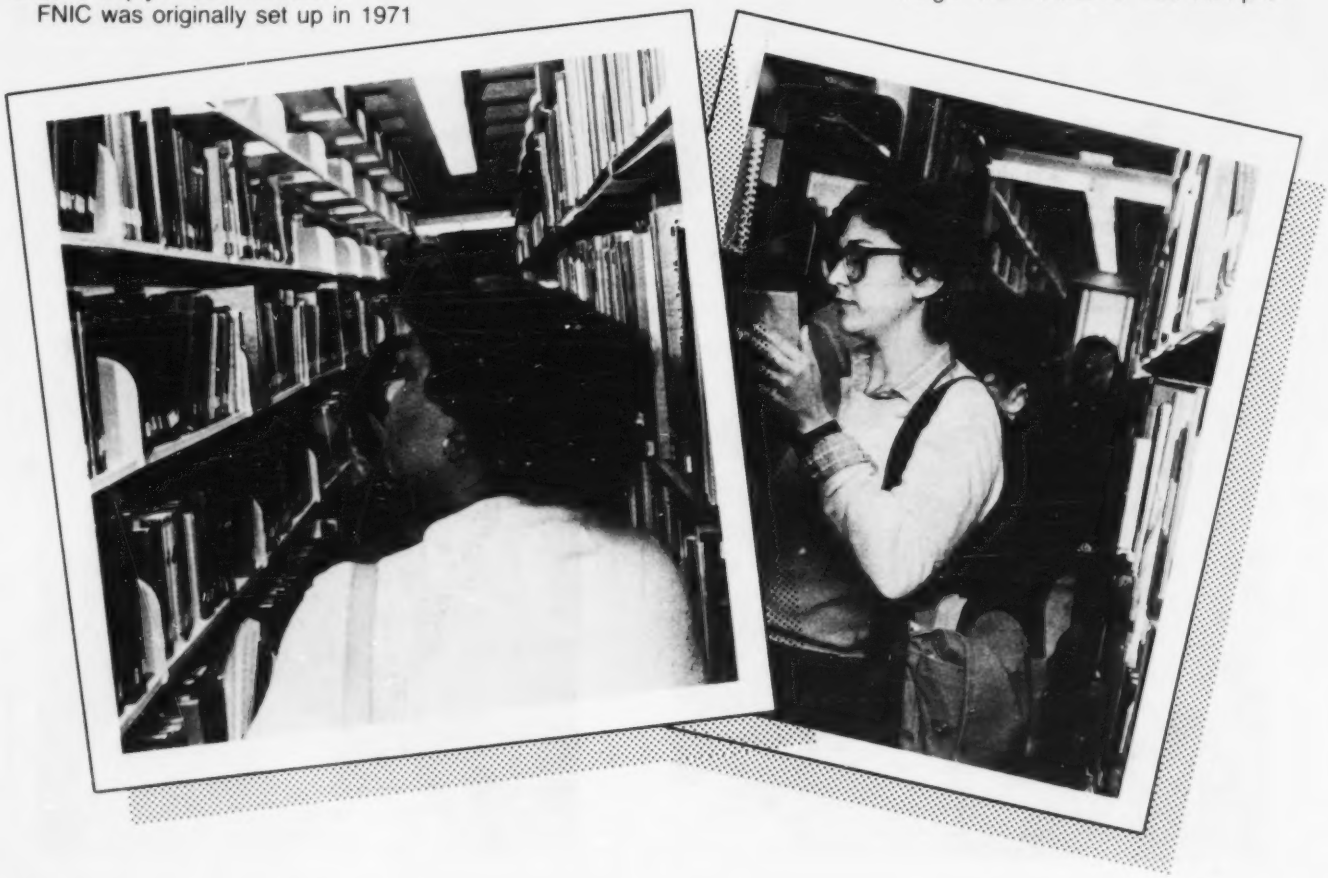
In addition to helping school food service staff and other school personnel, such as nurses and teachers, the center provides lending services and reference assistance to: members of Congress; U.S. Department of Agriculture and other federal and state government personnel; librarians, media specialists, and researchers; university and college faculty; officers of professional societies; Cooperative Extension Service staff; and people working at both the state and local levels with food and nutrition programs.

Variety of resource materials available

FNIC has a variety of resource materials that otherwise might be difficult to obtain. "We have access to information sources that have been developed by professionals working in the state programs as well as in the private sector," says FNIC director Robyn Frank.

"We have made every effort to acquire and maintain a comprehensive collection in the areas of applied nutrition, especially nutrition education, and food service management."

The scope of the nutrition materials ranges from those for use with pre-



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school through grade twelve. FNIC serves as the national repository for materials developed through the Nutrition Education and Training Program (NET).

Included in the collection are materials developed by participating state agencies, universities, and school districts that used NET funds in projects tailored to local needs. FNIC's bibliography of these materials, *Promoting Nutrition Through Education,* is used widely.

Frank emphasizes that anyone working with FNS programs—from a food service worker in a small rural school to a state school food service director—can request FNIC services. People eligible to use FNIC may borrow an unlimited number of books and use them for 1 month. They may borrow up to three audiovisual items at one time and keep them for 2 weeks. They may also request photocopies of up to six journal articles at one time.

All items in FNIC's collection are compiled in print and audiovisual catalogs published by Oryx Press. Oryx has started a new quarterly update service entitled *The Food and Nutrition Quarterly Index,* to bring information about new materials to patrons rnore rapidly.

Frank suggests that FNS patrons encourage school libraries and media centers to purchase the catalogs so they will be available for the school nutrition team to look up appropriate materials to borrow for their programs.

Martrene Wicks, NET coordinator for Wyoming, says publicizing FNIC's lending services was a first step for her when Wyoming joined the Nutrition Education Training Program (NET) last August. "I decided one of the things I could do to help the most people the fastest was to distribute the FNIC audiovisuals catalog to every school library in the state.

"I purchased copies of the catalog with NET monies, then publicized their availability through the superintendents, and asked the teachers and food service personnel to use them. We reached every town."

FNIC has a comprehensive collection of resource materials helpful to people working with food and nutrition programs. Pictured here are some of the materials displayed for visitors.

FNIC FNIC FNIC

FNIC also helps identify references

In addition to lending materials, FNIC also helps patrons identify appropriate references on specific questions or topics. The staff may answer the questions over the phone or provide a list of the most recent articles, books, and films on the subject. Depending on the specific inquiry, they may also do a search of the computer data bases to which they have access.

Last year Jane Senese, nutrition education consultant with the Pennsylvania Department of Health, was planning an annual meeting for local agency nutrition educators working with the WIC program. She contacted a pediatrician whose specialization is hematology to present information on anemia.

"I gave him some background information on WIC and called Holly Irving at FNIC to request a computer search for additional materials on anemia among WIC clientele. When I got the printout from FNIC, I marked the references in the search I thought would be helpful and sent the printout to Dr. Cohen. His talk was so apropos and directly related to WIC, it really impressed the nutritionists."

Carolyn Trivette, NET coordinator for Louisiana, is encouraging Child Care Food Program sponsors and staff in her state to use FNIC more. "At our annual conference with the day care providers this year, we held a training session using FNIC resources," she says.

"Janet Harland at FNIC did a computer search for appropriate materials for instructing new day care staff, including some items developed through NET. We hope that by giving the staff some information on how to conduct training, they will feel more comfortable doing it themselves using FNIC resources."

At a workshop at FNIC in January, 26 school food service directors, managers, and supervisors from the Washington-Baltimore area got some "hands-on" experience using a variety of computer software programs.

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Software packages are used at center

Besides printed and audiovisual materials, FNIC has become a reliable source of information on more than 120 computer software programs covering a variety of food and nutrition topics. Agreements with the software producers from whom FNIC received or purchased the programs prevents the center from lending the software.

However, the staff encourages patrons to make appointments and come to the center for hands-on experience using FNIC's Apple and IBM personal computers. "We provide assistance so everyone, no matter how little experience they have had with microcomputers, can find the most suitable program for their needs," says Holly Irving.

For example, nutritionists can find efficient systems to analyze clients' diets. School food service managers can find tools for inventory control, recipe costing, personnel scheduling, and other management tasks. Nutrition educators can compare programs that teach children sound eating habits through interactive games or question-and-answer formats.

Joan Clements, food service specialist from Fairfax County, Virginia, organized a software preview workshop at FNIC for a group of food service personnel from the Washington-Baltimore area. Twenty-five software programs selected from some of the most frequently used packages were demonstrated.

Eulalia Muschik, coordinator of food services for Maryland's Carroll County schools, saw the potential of using some of the programs for training workers at the local level. She feels computerized training packages will be used extensively for self-study in the future.

"I will encourage individual school managers to purchase some packages that focus on topics of primary importance every day. For example, new workers need to know relatively quickly about sanitation practices and food preparation skills. While time schedules often preclude group training sessions, almost all schools have at least one computer, and some have seven or eight," Muschik says.

Eulalia Muschik was one of 26 participants in the software workshop.

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Special activities that take place at the center are, for practical reasons, usually limited to people from nearby communities. But Robyn Frank and her staff want FNIC to be a resource for people throughout the country.

"Some people may not realize they don't have to live in this area to use FNIC services easily," says Frank. "In recent years, we've begun a number of new projects to reach as many state and local people as possible."

Articles reach ASFSA members

One project, designed to reach school food service staff, was a series of articles on food service training materials available at FNIC. The articles were written for FNIC by Fairfax, Virginia, county food service director Dorothy VanEgmond-Pannell and her staff.

The "FNIC Presents" series appeared monthly in the *School Food Service Journal,* which reaches the 57,000 members of the American School Food Service Association. This 10-part series, with annotated bibliographies of print and audiovisual materials, covered such diverse topics as recruitment and hiring and controlling food costs.

To acquaint food service workers with some of the most popular food service software programs in FNIC's collection, Pannell followed up the recent software demonstration at FNIC with two articles for the *Journal.*

"The main goal," says Pannell, "was to show that computer programs have different levels of difficulty and different features. The articles gave information on the price, the audience level, and the machines on which they can be used. Providing association members with information through their professional journal helps them make informed purchase decisions."

Networks reach wider audiences

Another way FNIC is getting the word out to a wider audience is through state liaison networks. A number of networks have been set up to reach school food service personnel, WIC nutritionists, and school nurses. Currently, plans are underway with the Head Start Bureau to establish a network to reach local Head Start personnel.

For each network, there is a liaison person in every state. The liaison receives periodic mailings from FNIC and in turn passes on the information to people at the local level through such channels as newsletters, meetings, and workshops.

The network mechanism gives FNIC the opportunity to share with people nationwide some of the activities FNIC organizes for those who live and work near the center.

For example, in 1985, FNIC hosted a 2-day training workshop in cooperation with the Educational Support Services Branch of the Maryland State Department of Education. The purpose of the workshop, according to Maryland section chief Sheila Terry, was to prepare Maryland school food service supervisors to hold local training sessions on their own, using FNIC resources.

"Robyn Frank helped with the design of the workshop, and her staff gathered materials on a number of key management topics," says Terry. At the workshop, the supervisors broke into small groups to review the materials and select those they'd recommend for use in school food service management training.

The next FNIC mailing to state school food service liaisons included information about the Maryland workshop and the steps a state could follow to set up a customized training program using the Maryland plan as a model.

Calling on FNIC to help plan a food service training program for an association or a local school district gives a state an ideal opportunity to use some of the many excellent resources in our collection," says Janet Harland, who works extensively with the state and local school food service people who use FNIC.

New service for WIC nutritionists

Holly Irving, who has special responsibilities for helping WIC nutritionists, recently set up a new "Current Awareness Reference Service" (CARS) for this group.

"We select from the most recent print and audiovisual materials in the computer data base on topics we think would help WIC staff," she says. "There are professional articles and literature reviews, as well as materials appropriate for WIC participants themselves."

Pennsylvania's Jane Senese says she found the CARS list on infant feeding especially helpful. "I marked a number of items I wanted to preview, a few filmstrips with audio-cassettes, a movie or two, and several articles.

"When I take time to preview movies, I can better evaluate requests for purchase by the nutrition educators in small agencies. If a movie is very good, I'll give priority for purchase."

Senese, like many of her colleagues in other states, finds FNIC a valuable resource. "FNIC is a permanent agenda item for our annual planning meeting," she says. "Since we have new folks at the meeting, I always hand out the telephone file cards that FNIC supplies and encourage people to call or write.

"The staff is marvelous, and the turnaround time is excellent—a week or 2 weeks at the most. As we develop our new initiatives for 1987, I will ask the nutrition education coordinators from our local agencies to send suggestions for future CARS topics to FNIC."

FNIC clients can help the center

People who benefit from FNIC can help spread the word about the center's services. The staff at FNIC have a new tabletop exhibit they can send out for use at meetings, seminars, and workshops. The exhibit is easy to borrow, set up, and return.

Ruth Ritenour, assistant food service supervisor for Virginia's Prince William County, borrowed the exhibit for a

FNIC FNIC FNIC

presentation to 100 school food service supervisors and directors attending a Virginia school food service association meeting. FNIC supplied her with about 30 books and other materials for a coordinated display along with a slide set that gives an overview of FNIC services.

"My goal was to alert the members how easy it is to use FNIC," Ritenour says. "We use FNIC a lot because we are close and know how helpful the staff is, but others should take advantage."

Robyn Frank is excited about the variety of new services FNIC has initiated and wants to hear from the people who use them. "Feedback is very important to us," she says. "Let us know how you use FNIC, what kinds of materials you need, and how we can best help you."

For more information on how to use FNIC services, write or call:

Food and Nutrition Information Center (FNIC)
National Agricultural Library, Rm. 304
10301 Baltimore Boulevard
Beltsville, Maryland 20705
Telephone: (301) 344-3719

FNIC has a 24-hour telephone monitoring service.

article by Martha Poolton, FNS liaison to FNIC
photos by Larry Rana and Paul Rowen

New Network Reaches School Nurses

School nurses are important members of the school nutrition team and often head up nutrition education projects. This year, the American School Health Association (ASHA), the National Association of State School Nurse Consultants (NASSNC), and state departments of health are establishing a networking system to encourage school nurses to use FNIC services.

In April, Diane Allensworth, ASHA president, and Ruth Ellen Luehr, NASSNC president, co-signed a letter to state consultants describing how FNIC can help school nurses in their work as nutrition educators. They asked the consultants to serve as coordinators of the new network.

The coordinators will receive periodic mailings from FNIC specifically tailored for school nurses. They will share the information with local school nurses through newsletters, workshops, and other communications.

"I think the FNIC service is fantastic," Allensworth says. "This cooperative effort between ASHA, NASSNC, and USDA is significant and has the potential for contributing to the improved health of school-aged children—a goal we share."

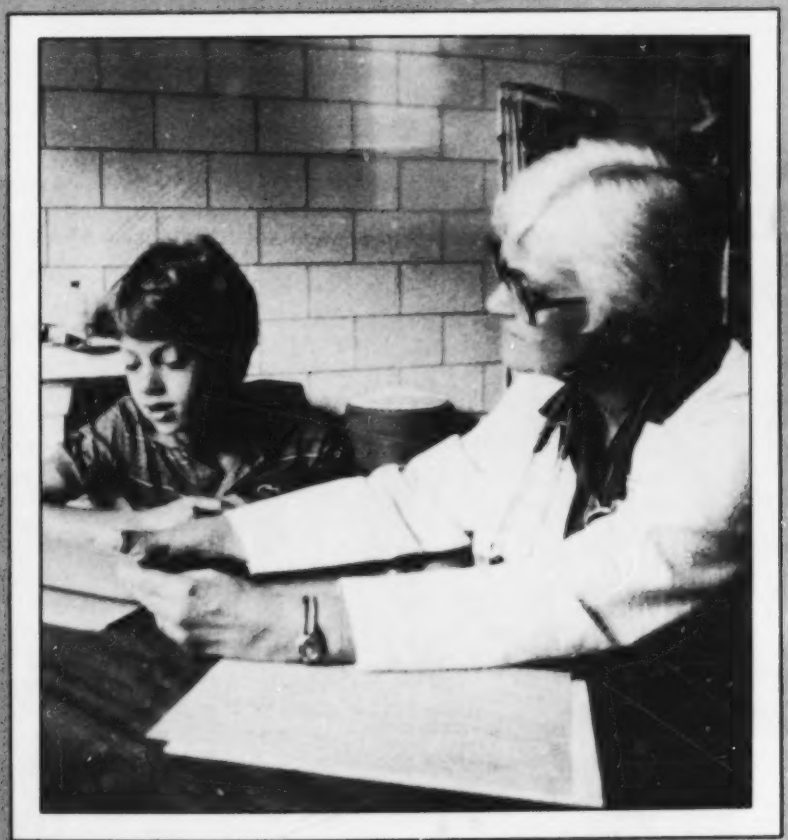


photo courtesy of the American School Health Association

Training For Caseworkers Gets High Marks In New Hampshire

Cindy Driscoll stood at the flip chart with her felt-tip pen poised, inviting a group of technicians from New Hampshire's Office of Economic Services (OES) to offer reasons why their clients might refuse to cooperate during an interview.

As case technician and then supervisor in a district office, Driscoll had talked to thousands of clients to determine whether they were eligible for food stamps or other economic assistance programs. Now she was sharing that experience with trainees in a workshop OES developed to improve the professional quality of jobs once regarded as strictly technical.

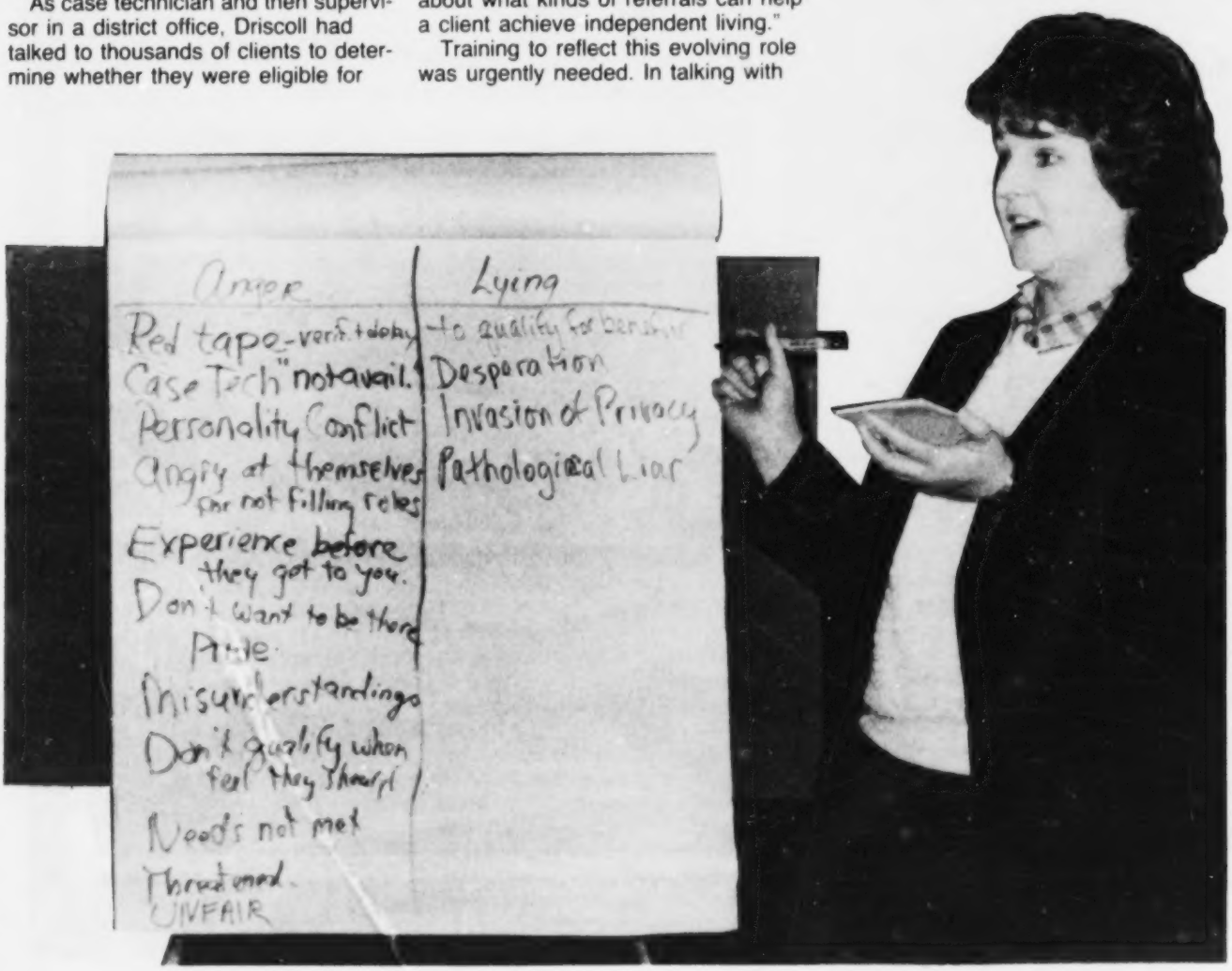
The workshop, which focused on writing and interviewing skills, ethics, stress management, self-image, and group dynamics, was part of a series of workshops designed to respond to the changing nature of the case technician's job.

As Lorin Mulligan, head of OES' bureau of internal operations, explains, "Case technicians had moved from recording and processing information to managing a caseload. They had taken on tasks formerly handled by social workers, such as making decisions about what kinds of referrals can help a client achieve independent living."

Training to reflect this evolving role was urgently needed. In talking with technicians throughout the state, Mulligan found they wanted more than specific instruction in program and data management. There was a clear need to bolster morale, build a spirit of teamwork, and instill confidence in their professional skills.

Training helped build new skills

The 11 case technicians watching Driscoll in January were the last of 9 groups to attend the workshops. They were quick to respond when she asked for reasons why some clients might feel angry or frustrated. She led them to identify problems they could help solve and suggested a technique of "active listening."



"This is a method that lets people know you have heard not only their words, but their feelings," she said. "Accepting another person's feelings as valid will often bring about changes in attitude."

Driscoll talked about the theory behind the technique and the steps in applying it. She cautioned her listeners to use it only if they sincerely believed it would work.

After her presentation, Peter Bradley, another district supervisor, offered pointers on how to prepare for an interview and how to convey meaning through body language.

"A good interviewer is self-assured, interested, and responsible," he said. "Within the first 5 seconds, you establish by your manner who you are and what you expect from the client. The way you introduce yourself, your eye contact, your gestures, the attention you give, all of these are clues to your competence and professionalism."

Both presenters strolled around the small conference room, inviting opinions and participation. Tables were placed at an angle to avoid the lecture hall format.

In the afternoon, after a congenial meal together, participants tested their new skills by role-playing interviews in which the trainers impersonated difficult clients.

Trainers familiar with workers' job

All of the workshop leaders were professional employees of the New Hampshire Division of Human Services who were brought together by OES to develop the training.

Program specialists Avis Crane and Dorothy Leavitt and case technician Claudia Boutin developed and led the first day's sessions, which focused on written communication, ethics, and confidentiality. Bradley and Driscoll developed and presented the second day's sessions on interviewing the difficult client.

Helping case technicians improve their professional skills was the goal of the New Hampshire workshops. Here, at the final session held in January, Cindy Driscoll (left), Peter Bradley (right), and Kate Giffin (above center) review material they have prepared for the group.

Kate Giffin, coordinator of the training, Paul Snook, a state office supervisor, and Mulligan developed and presented the third day's sessions on interpersonal skills. Celie Aufiero, a case technician, led a stress management workshop.

"The coordinating team consisted of people with a commitment to training," Mulligan says. "Among us, we had the knowledge and experience to present the different topics we selected.

"For instance, several of the trainers had taken a course for instructors and had done training before, some of it on their own time."

One of the biggest advantages of having instruction by colleagues was that the training could focus specifically on the case technicians' responsibilities. "We know the problems they are likely to face," says Mulligan, "and some of us have done the same job."

Together the team worked out a curriculum and tested it with a group of technicians and supervisors. Based on their critiques, they made some changes in the length and focus of presentations.

"We were fortunate in having teaching talent available within our staff," says Mulligan. Trainees learned from the presenters and from their more experienced co-workers, and everyone developed a sense of camaraderie."

A feeling of teamwork was strengthened by participation of top level staff. OES administrator Barry Bodell opened each workshop with a talk to the group about his philosophy and expectations for the agency. A district administrator then discussed the history of human services and how the bureaucracy functions.

These presentations allowed administrators to explain how they try to make policy workable at all levels. They emphasized to eligibility workers their vital role as members of the agency team. Later, administrators and other members of the state office staff joined trainers and trainees for dinner and more informal conversation.

"Retreat" approach met with success

"Although we plan to offer an advanced version of this workshop in the future," says Mulligan, "it will take less time to develop. This time we had to decide not just the content but the kind of training. We had first-time issues to settle.

"For instance, we chose to offer the training throughout the state rather than to centralize it and to request that everyone attend rather than make it optional. People were most divided on whether to hold the workshops at the job site or in the form of a retreat."

By a close vote, the committee chose to select a pleasant site and ask attendees to stay overnight. Those who could not attend were scheduled for the final two sessions.

"We didn't want other responsibilities, at home or at the office, competing for attention," says Kate Giffin.

She says getting away from the worksite had other advantages as well. "We found that the social activities encouraged a spirit of friendliness and trust that made everyone more willing to actively participate. Many of those with initial doubts later said they enjoyed the experience and felt it allowed them to get to know their co-workers better.

"Employees at all levels related freely as individuals outside the office hierarchy," says Giffin. "'One trainee told me, 'At last I know the faces behind the names.' "

Virtually every case technician in the state has completed the 3-day workshop, and agency officials are pleased with the results.

"We found from a questionnaire we circulated that workshop participants valued the friendly give-and-take with co-workers and having their ideas heard," says Mulligan. "As important as the skills they learned was a new sense of the value of their role."

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article and photos
by Wini Scheffler

Conference in Midwest Opens New Lines of Communication

"Self-taught" took on new meaning for 75 child nutrition staffers from the six Midwest states last summer. For 4 days in July, they were the teachers as well as the students in a training conference sponsored by the Food and Nutrition Service's Midwest regional office (MWRO).

The conference was the idea of Russ Circo, regional director of special nutrition programs for MWRO. "Despite restricted budgets," says Circo, "state staff have come up with many innovative and effective techniques to improve program operations. We wanted to have a conference where staff from all the states in the region could share their knowledge, skills, successes, and problems."

Circo followed up on a hunch that Phil O'Leary, director of school management services for Michigan's Department of Education, might be interested in hosting the conference. O'Leary was. He appointed staff member Susan Perkowski to work with MWRO's Mary Jane Getlinger to put together the conference.

Worked closely with state staff

"Our first job was to assess what kinds of information the states wanted to share," says Getlinger. "We reviewed topics presented in past seminars and contacted other regions to discuss kinds of topics they had success in sharing. We especially looked at deficiencies cited in management evaluations to identify areas needing improvement."

Perkowski sent a list of suggested topics to each state for comment and rating. "We specifically wanted staff

Conferees accomplished a lot, even when hot July weather caused them to move their sessions outside.

comments since this training was to be for staff. We also asked for volunteer presenters willing to share their successes and ideas. From this survey, we built our agenda."

The agenda was full. There were panel discussions, lectures, workshops, and special presentations. Topics included current nutrition issues, communications, effective program monitoring, food distribution, controlling food service costs, and improving training and technical assistance.

For personal development, a communications specialist spoke on "Resolving Conflict Without Losing Your Sanity" and "Training As a Performing Art." For fun, there was a steak fry at a local park.

Michigan State University was chosen as the conference site to emphasize the educational purpose of the conference as well as to minimize costs. Registration, meals, and three nights lodging totaled only $90.50 per person.

"I personally like the university environment for such meetings," says Ed Post, state director of child nutrition programs for Wisconsin. "It helps cut costs and makes it easier to get the support of our state officials when requesting approval for out-of-state travel." State and regional staff cut travel costs further by renting vans and traveling by train.

States found meeting helpful

At the adjournment of the conference, participants provided their comments, criticisms, and suggestions on evaluation forms. The workshop atmosphere received the most enthusiastic endorsement from the respondents, scoring 4.5 on a scale of 5.0 as excellent.

Gary Zarcone, who has been working with child nutrition programs in Wisconsin for 8 years, said the real value was in relating to people from other states. "We talked about how our states were different and how our states were alike," he said. "I realized, 'Hey, I'm not out there alone.' Others are having the same types of problems."

Similar sentiment was expressed by Minnesota child nutrition program specialist Margaret Drey. "The conference improved the morale of the staff," she said. "We gained contacts and developed better working relationships with the regional office and other states. We learned what people do with similar problems."

Russ Circo believes the conference succeeded in many ways. He's convinced participants benefitted from the personal contact with their colleagues from other states. He also feels they gained some new knowledge of program operations and some new skills.

Would he do it again? "Definitely yes," he says.

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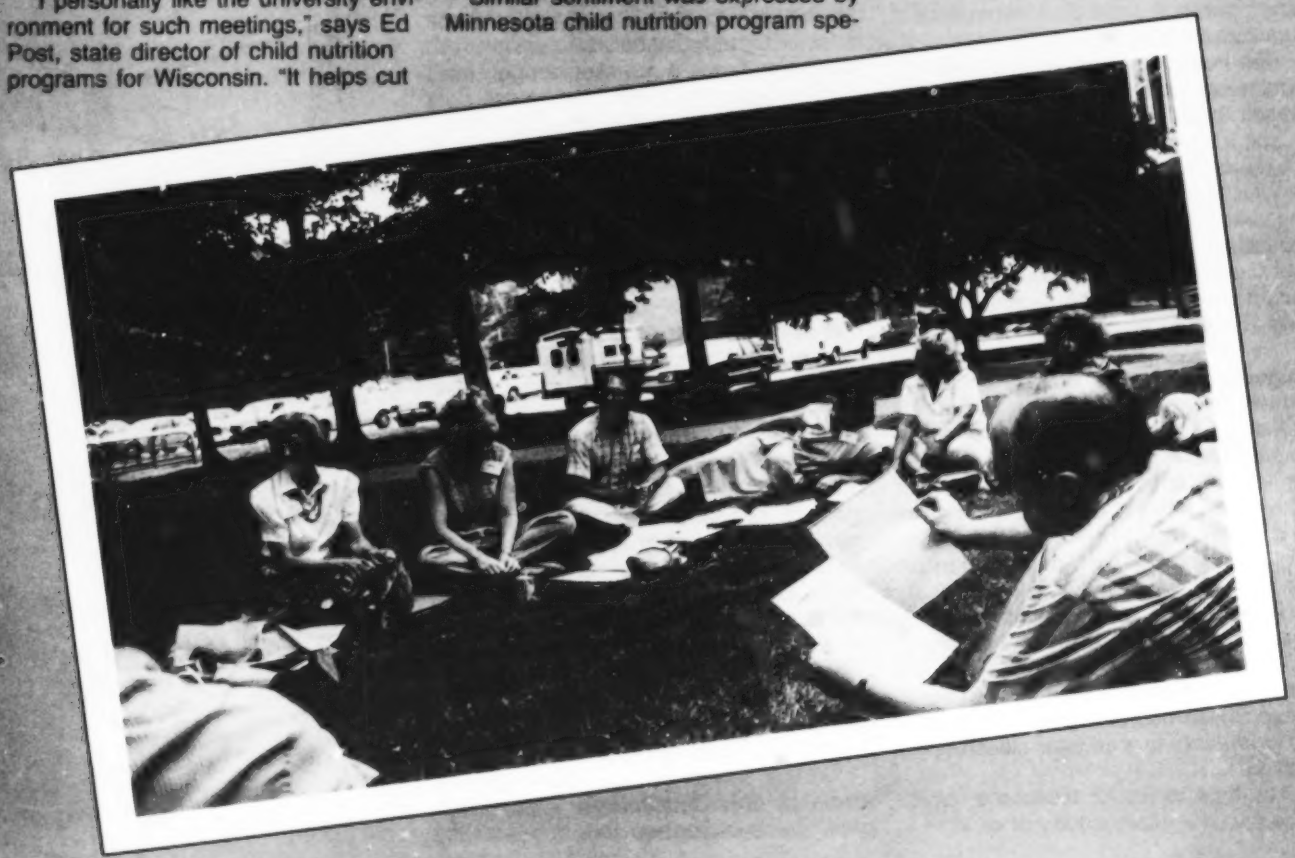
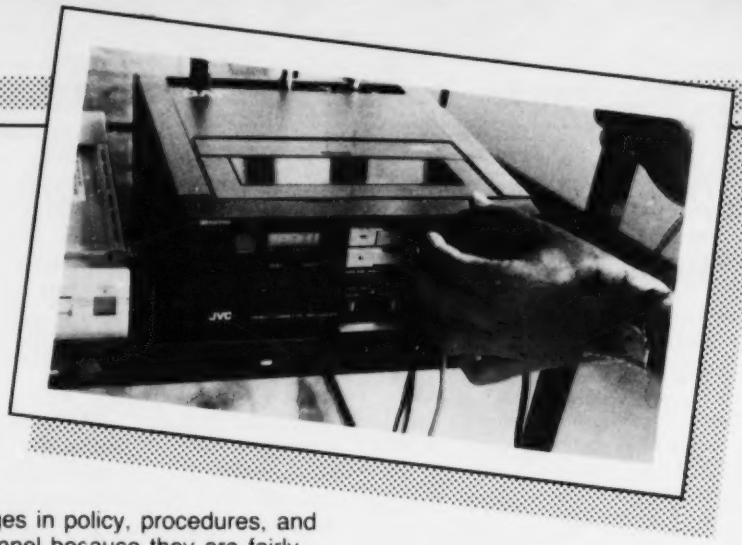
article and photos
by Mary Jane Getlinger



Videotapes Cut Training And Travel Costs in Nevada



The sight of a videotape machine at the head of a training class—once new and unusual—is now commonplace at many state and federal agencies. Videotapes offer a convenient way to provide inexpensive instruction, and staff at the Nevada State Welfare Agency are using them to save time as well as money.

Two years ago, Jackie Cheney, program specialist and training instructor for the AFDC division of the welfare agency, and Carol Boice, food stamp program specialist and fellow instructor, began videotaping training sessions dealing with agency policy and procedural changes. They sent the tapes out to the state's nine welfare agency offices.

"We happened to have the video equipment," says Cheney, "and it wasn't that difficult to operate."

The idea paid off. It once took 2 weeks for the pair to travel to offices around the state to present one training class, but now, they spend 1 day or less taping the same information. "We were looking for ways to cut costs, and videotaping is definitely a dollar savings," Cheney says.

Experimented with timing and topics

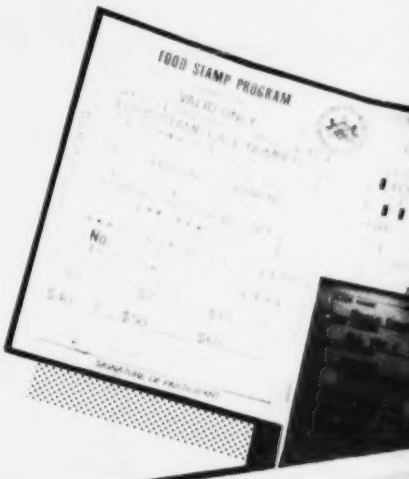
Although they had originally planned to put together a monthly training video for every procedural or policy change, they found this took too much time and manpower. Now, they make a tape highlighting major revisions every other month.

They found through trial and error that computer and technical information was too complex to lend itself to the videotape learning process. Instead, these course topics are taught by instructors in a regular classroom setting.

The best topics for videotape, says Cheney, are explanations of or changes in policy, procedures, and personnel because they are fairly straightforward and easy to understand.

The Nevada staff have found that consistency is a big advantage of videotaped training. Unlike live instruction, where some important information or explanations may be left out, the same information is given each time.

One of the disadvantages is that people dislike not being able to ask questions of an instructor. "They like to have the person there," says Cheney. However, she adds, many questions can be answered by the instructor in a letter or by phone after the session, and many times a question thought of in the middle of a tape may be addressed by the time it's over.



Presented tape on making tapes

Cheney and Boice had so much faith in the benefits of videotaped training that they made a tape about how to make a videotape. Entitled "Video Training in Nevada," they completed it 2 years ago and presented it at a conference in San Francisco.

One California agency showed interest and tried to make a videotape, but went to such elaborate means that "they dropped it," says Cheney. "You can't get carried away with it," she says. "You have to keep it simple."

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article by Lois Grunwald
photo by Tino Serrano

Workshops in Arizona Focus On Improving Management

First-line supervisors for Arizona's food stamp agency came away from a 1984 training program with more than the usual assortment of notes and handouts on management concepts.

They had worked hard and come up with 60 recommendations for improving the way they did their jobs.

The recommendations came out of a series of eight training sessions held throughout the state. Called "Productivity Colleges," the sessions focused on identifying and analyzing problems shared by local staff.

Problem-solving techniques taught

According to Diane Ross, manager of the state's program review unit, getting first-line supervisors involved was the key. "We felt that the best people to ask how to do the job were the people doing the job," she says. "We really just needed to bring them together and give them the tools."

The tools they learned were problem-solving techniques presented by a consultant during the training sessions. These included general brainstorming and decision-making techniques, team-building activities, methods of forming a consensus, and a process for problem identification and clarification they called "fishboning." Participants spent 1-1/2 days acquiring the tools, and then put their newly found skills to use.

For 3-1/2 days, participants worked in small groups, usually with other first-line supervisors from their own districts. They began by brainstorming to identify general areas they wanted to improve, then focused on issues on which they could have an impact. Using the fishboning technique, they identified as many causes as possible for each problem, eventually pinpointing the most significant.

A management level support staff gathered data for the groups to aid them in analyzing problems and developing solutions or alternatives that would have the most impact for the least cost.

After additional brainstorming, analyzing, and refining, the groups presented their proposals to top agency staff, including agency director Douglas Patino, who was supportive of the training from its inception.

Many supervisors still involved

For many of the supervisors, involvement in program management improvements didn't end with graduation from the "Productivity Colleges." Some are participating in the work groups that have been charged with following through on the recommendations. More than 30 of the 60 recommendations have been implemented to date.

Some recommendations implemented statewide were directed toward reducing forms and paperwork, and streamlining and simplifying the application process. Other recommendations were aimed at improving district or local office management, such as adding or reallocating staff to target needs, improving outreach and home visit procedures, and making alterations to office space.

Diane Ross says the results of the "Productivity Colleges" go beyond the administrative improvements, citing higher morale and better communication between local, district, and state levels. She also feels that the participants have more confidence, enabling them to take a more active role in improving management.

"Supervisors took these lessons back to their offices and are using the problem-solving skills they learned with their own staff to look for new ways to improve local office management," she says.

The state staff plan to train new supervisors in "Productivity College" techniques and hope to provide refresher courses to graduates. An annual statewide conference, called SHARE (Supervisors Helping Arizona Reach Excellence), will continue to bring first-line supervisors together to share ideas on how they can improve program management.

Overall, both Ross and the participants give the "Productivity Colleges" high marks.

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article by Dee Amaden

Special Effort In California Helps Grocers Understand WIC

There's a video in California that's so hot it will probably be re-released in foreign languages to reach more markets. Actually, it's about markets. It's a WIC training videotape that teaches grocers how to conduct their WIC business properly, and it's helping the state go after those who don't.

California WIC coordinator Jack Metz, who is known for his aggressive, effective vendor compliance program, says his staff has been using the tape for 2 years.

He's quick to point out the education/compliance link: "It's pretty tough to go after a vendor who's violating the program unless he's been taught the rules in an understandable manner and you can prove it. The videotape does both."

Explains grocers' responsibilities

The state WIC staff produced the training tape themselves with a helping hand from FNS regional WIC staff. They use it primarily in orientation classes for all newly authorized grocers to give a basic introduction to the WIC program and to spell out the responsibilities of authorized retailers.

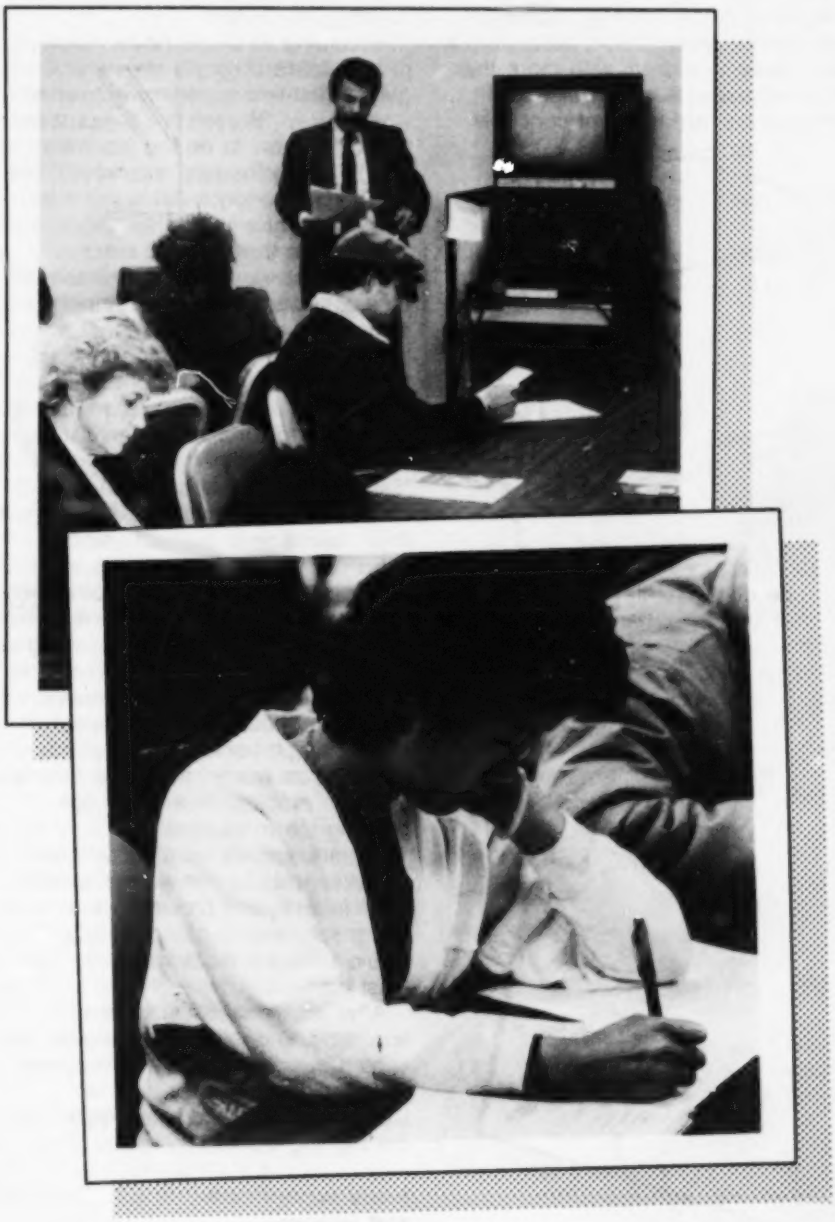
Because the videotape can be used without a trainer present, county health departments are also using it in their training programs, and some food store chains have made copies for their own use.

The California WIC staff have found that using the 20-minute tape to begin the training sessions tends to encourage discussion rather than lecture-type classes. Because the tape focuses on vendor responsibilities, the discussion usually centers around compliance and maintaining a basic inventory of the WIC foods. And compliance is the area where the state staff feel the tape is really paying off.

The tape discourages violations by portraying the vendor as an integral part of a very positive program. "Most of the vendors are honest," says Metz, "and for them the tape defines how they must conduct their WIC business to stay within the law." The straightforward presentation helps vendors have a clear understanding of their responsibilities.

To underscore the importance of playing by the rules, the tape includes a section that details the audit process and the possible financial consequences for any inconsistencies.

When vendors do abuse the program, the videotape provides the proof they know better. "It takes the wind out



of the almost universal alibi, that the vendor didn't realize he was doing something wrong, didn't know he was violating program rules," says Metz.

Written test follows tape

Immediately after seeing the tape, vendors take a written test on the material and sign the test sheet. Should the vendor later be involved in a compliance hearing, the tape proves that all the points were covered in the training, the test results prove the vendor understood the material, and the vendor's signature on the test shows that he or she participated in the training.

Using the tape, the staff feel more confident that vendors are getting the complete message, and they think it's making more of an impression than one-on-one training or printed material.

According to Debbie Walker, nutrition education coordinator for the state WIC program, "There's no question the videotape makes vendors more aware of their responsibilities. There's no other way we could cover as much information as well and keep their attention."

Because of the success of the videotape and the ease with which it can be edited to stay up to date, the state has some changes in the works to make it even more helpful. They're developing a package of written material to accompany the tape presentation, and considering producing it in Spanish and Vietnamese.

Says Walker of the presentation she makes in the videotape, "I was surprised to hear how different I sounded on tape, and it's going to be a real shock to hear myself in Vietnamese, but the staff feel strongly about trying to get this message to every vendor."

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article and photos
by Tino Serrano

Opposite page: Lloyd Hickman of California's WIC staff gives instructions to *grocers taking the test that follows the* training tape. *Above:* A grocer sells WIC foods to a program participant.

The Classroom Is a Clinic at Washington's WIC Training Center

WIC ETC has a split personality. It's a WIC clinic with a caseload of about 300, and a training center for WIC staff from all across Washington State.

WIC ETC stands for WIC Education and Training Center. Located near Lacey, just a few miles from the state capital in Olympia, the center has been in operation less than a year, but already has 45 graduates working in 23 local WIC clinics—43 percent of the clinics in the state.

The new facility, specifically designed for its dual role, opened its clinic doors in March, 1985. Within 6 months, the operational bugs were worked out and classes for clerks and certifiers began. Today classes range from week-long basic orientation courses to 1- to 2-day skills classes, with a good number of "by special request" training activities sprinkled in.

Students at WIC ETC learn their lessons through a combination of formal classroom instruction and hands-on supervised clinic experience working with WIC clients. The state agency feels the instruction and immediate application is a good mix.

Courses based on local needs

WIC ETC came into being when the state agency staff, monitoring local clinic operations, realized a number of common problem areas kept cropping up in clinics throughout the state. Needed was a more effective, consistent way of training local agency staff, especially new employees.

The problem areas identified during monitoring visits became the basis for WIC ETC's week-long orientation course for newly hired clerks and certifiers. The course is available to all new employees at the option of the local agencies, who are encouraged to send their clerks and certifiers at the same time so they will learn as a team.

The course is scheduled once a month and limited to six people, enabling the students to work closely with the three regular staff members.

In addition to the basic course, a growing number of 1- to 2-day courses are available for local agency paraprofessionals who'd like to learn or brush up on specific skills, such as issuing vouchers or taking body measurements. Clinic supervisors sometimes request refresher training in areas identified as problem spots dur-

WIC certifier Maria Scott (far left) and dietitian Bill Schutte (far right) are two of the instructors at WIC ETC. Pictured with Schutte and in the center photos are some of the mothers and children the clinic serves.

ing monitoring visits or audits.

Lead instructor Jacque Beard and the three other instructors, who double as the clinic staff, develop training programs as needed, and hope to soon have a bank of basic training curricula and materials. In March, they began offering a 1-day class for nutritionists on counseling high-risk clients, and group nutrition education.

Center helps in many ways

Marilyn Connon, training and development manager for Washington State's WIC program, can rattle off an impressive list of advantages of the combined clinic/classroom. For one thing, in addition to providing the optimum mix of instruction and hands-on experience, the center serves as a proving ground for training materials that are then shared with local agencies.

It's also a timesaver for local clinic supervisors, who can now delegate some of their training responsibilities. And it makes sure trainees, and through them, their clinics, have the latest information about changes in program operations.

In its first 6 months, WIC ETC has earned itself a good reputation. "Supervisors tell us their staff are returning to the clinics with new confidence," says Connon. "And follow-up questionnaires completed by class participants 2 months after the training indicate they felt it improved their job skills as well as their understanding of the WIC program."

Future plans for WIC ETC are ambitious. "We want to use this facility to the maximum," says Connon, "and to do that, we're developing training programs just as fast as we can identify the needs."

Their ideas include: adding a basic orientation class for new clinic nutritionists, using videotapes to streamline instruction, and testing ways to use computers more extensively in local agencies. Also under consideration is using the center as the base for a circuit trainer who would periodically "take the classes on the road" to clinics in eastern Washington.

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article by Tino Serrano
photos by WIC ETC

"Wellness" Seminars Have Interesting Spin-Offs in The Southeast

"Wellness Targeted: A Challenge to Communicate" was the title of a conference jointly sponsored last fall by the Food and Nutrition Service's Southeast regional office (SERO) and the Society for Nutrition Education (SNE).

This innovative seminar was the first SNE had ever co-hosted with a federal agency, and public/private cooperation in health and nutrition education was a theme throughout. The seminar has resulted in some interesting spin-offs, including a number of similar conferences and training programs for state and local school food service staff.

Original seminar held in Atlanta

The FNS-SNE conference, held in Atlanta in October 1985, brought together more than 200 people working in the fields of nutrition and health, education, public service, and private industry. Workshops were designed to address special areas of concern, such as the nutrition needs of mothers and infants, children, and the elderly.

Speakers included a number of well-known nutrition and health experts. Among them were health futurist Rick Carlson, Cable News Network's nutrition director Carolyn O'Neil, Faye Wong from the Center for Disease Control, and Kathy Kolasa, head of East Carolina University's Department of Food, Nutrition, and Institution Management. Former Good Housekeeping Institute director Kristen McNutt, who is presently vice president of consumer and scientific affairs for Kraft, Inc., spoke on "marketing" nutrition.

The role of nutrition in health improvement efforts—such as weight management, exercise, and control of hypertension, for example—was a central focus of the seminar.

"There is no question that the role of nutrition in health care will increase in the future," Rick Carslon told conferees. "It is essential that nutritionists clarify and simplify their message. That may be difficult since people do not understand nutritional issues as easily as they understand the need for fitness or car safety."

Included in the meeting were an aerobics session and a tour of "Health Works," the Coca-Cola Company's state-of-the-art 28,000-square-foot health facility and health promotion program. Participants left the meeting enthusiastic about setting up training for co-workers and others.

Sparked similar effort in Tennessee

Nancy Carter, who is this year's chairperson for the Tennessee School Food Service Supervisors' Study Council, decided to organize a similar seminar in her state. "The Atlanta conference was great," Carter says, "and I wanted to do something similar for our supervisors."

Carter worked with the state child nutrition program office to coordinate speakers and topics, and Tennessee nutrition coordinator Helen Minns served as liaison between the state office and the study council. In March, more than 100 school food service supervisors from throughout Tennessee met in Nashville for the 2-day "wellness" seminar.

"The focus of the conference was nutrition education," says Minns. "With Tennessee set to spotlight school health as the focus for the governor's Healthy Children Initiative in school year 1986–1987, the time was ripe for this effort." The American Dietetic Association provided the meeting's theme with its 1986 slogan for National Nutrition Month—"Good Nutrition—Feel the Difference!"

Topics ranged from the implications of the national dietary guidelines to establishing personal nutrition goals and marketing nutrition messages.

"We also shared information from other school projects such as PIP—the Positive Image Program—for students needing help with relationships, weight loss, stress-reduction, and related factors," Minns says. The supervisors planned to incorporate many ideas into their local employee training.

"We're trying to help school food supervisors think about what they and their employees can do to improve their own health, and we're trying to focus on the dietary guidelines by providing the right materials to work with. If the workers see the need for changes in their own dietary health, they're more likely to incorporate these changes and improvements in school food programs."

Students and staff want information

Information on nutrition and health is very popular now, says Minns. "The students and workers not only need it, they want it. The trick is fitting nutrition education into already crowded curricula and competing for classroom time.

"The link between school food service and nutrition is even more important today," she adds. "Students need to learn nutrition in the schools. Because of our busy lifestyles, families eat together less often and parents don't always have time to teach children good food choices."

The Nashville meeting included a group luncheon and breakfast with food choices modeled after the national dietary guidelines. There was also an aerobics stretch break, a display of currently available nutrition education manuals, and an optional tour of the meeting hotel's health club.

Kathy Kolasa and Kristen McNutt, who had been featured at the Atlanta conference, also presented programs in Nashville. "We were fortunate to get these nationally known nutrition educators, both of whom are former national presidents of SNE," Minns says.

Liz Pendleton, from FNS' Southeast regional office, talked to the group about the child nutrition labeling program. Child nutrition-labeled foods show food service staff how products count toward USDA meal pattern requirements. Pendleton stressed that child nutrition labels can simplify purchasing decisions and assure that quality standards are being met.

Minns plans to use FNS and state expertise to expand the scope of future wellness seminars. "We would like to

There were six major presentations at Tennessee's "wellness" seminar, including this one (right) by Liz Pendleton of FNS' Southeast regional office. A variety of written materials were also available.

phase in technical training on reducing fat in cooking methods," she says. This is especially important in the Southeast, where excess fat and salt are often used for flavor. "However," says Minns, "changes must be made gradually so workers and students will accept them."

Other efforts also underway

Educators and school food service professionals in other parts of the Southeast are also working toward better health in schools and in the workplace. For example, several groups have been working together in Georgia to demonstrate how child nutrition programs can implement dietary guidelines and emphasize early nutrition education.

The Georgia Dental Association, the American Cancer Society, and the American Heart Association cosponsored with the Georgia Department of Education a series of school nutrition seminars on dental health, cancer awareness, and physical fitness. These seminars were held in several locations to make them accessible to people throughout the state.

Similar meetings were held in Alabama. In Mississippi, school food service staff held a "cook-off" for recipes which follow the dietary guidelines and use Mississippi products.

Sharing materials and information is an important part of these efforts. A good example is a weight management course developed by the North Carolina School of Public Health. The curriculum for the course, called "Take Control", was shared with the Department of Education in Florida and is now used by both states in the classroom and as a resource.

Thanks to cooperative efforts like these and activities like the wellness seminars, more people in the Southeast are getting—and spreading—the nutrition message.

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article and photos by
Catherine Rogers and Kent Taylor

Florida Food Stamp Families Learn While They Wait

With tight budgets, it's a real challenge for government agencies to add new services these days. But, by making good use of training technology and by carefully using available resources, state food stamp managers in Florida have managed to add nutrition education to the services they regularly provide low-income families.

"It's long been a desire of Florida to provide nutrition education to food stamp recipients," says Barbara Pogge, state food stamp nutrition education coordinator. "It's an obvious need we have recognized for some time. When USDA's Make Your Food Dollars Count project began and we were reminded that FNS will provide matching funds for nutrition education, we were prompted to go ahead and act on this need."

In July 1985, the Florida Department of Health and Rehabilitative Services submitted to FNS a revised state plan of operation outlining the state's plans for nutrition education. With this plan, Florida became the second state in the nation to implement a food stamp nutrition education component and qualify for federal matching funds for conducting client education activities.

Unlike Oklahoma, the first state to implement a nutrition education component, Florida did not have a staff of home economists who could assume the nutrition education activities. The state agency formed a task force to decide how training could best be delivered to food stamp clients.

Decided to use videotapes

Task force members thought it would not be fair to increase the duties of already overburdened local staff by adding new assignments related to nutrition education. Yet, to reach Florida's large food stamp caseload of more than 600,000 people, a way was needed to widely disseminate information in an understandable form.

The task force concluded that showing videotapes on television monitors in food stamp waiting rooms was a good long-term approach to client education.

"We wanted to make sure we could capture people's attention, hold it, and provide them with something useful and meaningful," explains Josie Colston, state food stamp program administrator. "Videotapes have proven to be effective in this way."

"With videotapes, you don't have to worry about the reading level of your client population," adds Pogge. "People don't have to be able to read to watch television so you can reach uneducated clients and children of clients.

"Many times children remember what their mothers don't remember. If you can reach children through the videotapes, they may influence their mothers to buy the nutritious foods they see and hear about."

Video cassette players and television monitors have been purchased and placed in the 40 largest food stamp offices in Florida. These 40 offices serve 62 percent of the state's caseload. Future plans include purchasing videotape equipment for 16 more offices, allowing the state to reach as much as 78 percent of the caseload. Ultimately, the food stamp staff would like to have equipment in every office.

Purchases were planned carefully

Colston and Pogge planned the equipment purchases carefully. With assistance from the Department of Health and Rehabilitative Services' public information staff, they researched the best equipment to buy, seeking not only good quality machines with the features they needed but also equipment that would not become quickly obsolete.

They polled local office staff to identify anticipated problems and tried to find solutions to those problems beforehand. For example, theft of the equipment was a major concern expressed by many local offices, so ways to deal with theft were developed to meet the needs of particular offices.

Some offices mounted the equipment high on a wall or placed it on movable carts which are wheeled into waiting rooms in the morning and then locked up in a secure place at night. Others placed it behind counters where it is easily viewed but is not accessible to clients or other people entering the waiting room.

"We also anticipated a tampering problem, particularly in offices where children could reach the dials of the television sets," says Pogge. "We bought equipment that is tamper proof. A button can be set on the back so that turning dials on the front of the television set has no effect."

According to Pogge, using the equipment in local offices requires very little effort. A worker has been selected in each office to be in charge of the equipment and to start a videotape in the morning. The equipment is set up so that a videotape will rewind when it ends and then start over, playing continuously all day.

Many sources used for tapes

Pogge's top priority now is building a videotape library to provide offices with a wide selection of materials to show clients. Every office with equipment has already received several 1-hour videotapes. The tapes contain a series of short segments, ranging from a maximum of 15 minutes to a minimum of 30 seconds in length, on a variety of nutrition issues.

Some of the segments are taken from slide/tape series or movies which have been converted to videotape. The short segments are television public service announcements. This format allows most clients to see at least one videotape segment in its entirety while

Florida is the second state in the country to add a nutrition education component to its food stamp program. *Above:* State food stamp administrator Josie Colston (right) meets with Barbara Pogge (left), food stamp nutrition education coordinator. *Below:* Program participant Vanessa Edwards watches a videotaped nutrition message in a Tallahassee food stamp office.

OFFICE HOURS
CERTIFICATION 8 - 5
SYSTEMS CONTROL 10 - 1
ISSUANCE 9 - 2

they are waiting in the food stamp office.

USDA's Make Your Food Dollars Count slide/tape series on wise food purchasing was recorded and included on both of the first two videotapes developed for local offices.

Other videotapes, from a variety of sources, have included information on such topics as: following the dietary guidelines; dieting sensibly; limiting sodium; planning nutritious meals for the elderly; and purchasing, storing, and preparing foods from each of the four major food groups.

To interest clients' children in future videotapes, Pogge hopes to locate some cartoon-type productions on nutrition topics to intersperse with the segments targeted towards adults.

WIC staff played important role

As a one-woman nutrition education staff, Barbara Pogge has, of necessity, learned to draw on the resources and expertise of others in establishing a nutrition education program. Staff of Florida's WIC program, which is also administered by the Department of Health and Rehabilitative Services, have been indispensable partners in developing the nutrition education program.

State WIC nutrition consultants, for example, spent hours reviewing nutrition education materials to find those appropriate for food stamp clients. Other WIC staff members provided initial production assistance and translated the Make Your Food Dollars Count slide/tape series into Spanish for videotaping.

Since 20 percent of Florida's food stamp participants are Spanish-speaking, there is a real need for Spanish-language materials. The WIC program also serves a large number of Spanish-speaking participants, so the WIC staff will be able to use the translated slide/tape series for WIC nutrition education purposes as well.

Ann Rhode, Florida WIC program director, says, "When the food stamp staff contacted us about their need for a nutrition education program, we jumped at the opportunity to assist them. In Florida, we strongly believe in an integrated approach to client service and are always looking for ways to cooperate with other programs. We hope this project will be an innovative example for the rest of the nation."

"Without WIC, we really couldn't have done what we have," Pogge confirms. Besides the WIC staff, she has been assisted by a number of other offices in the Department of Health and Rehabilitative Services, including the public information staff and the Health Prevention Office, which has provided pamphlets for distribution at food stamp offices.

Outside the Department, Pogge is working with the Agricultural Extension Service's Expanded Food and Nutrition Education Program (EFNEP), the Florida Department of Education's Nutrition Education and Training (NET) Program, trade associations, and private industry groups to obtain materials and other resources.

Through networking, she hopes to be able to limit production costs for videotapes by taking advantage of high quality audiovisual materials already developed and not copyrighted. She and food stamp administrator Josie Colston would also like to explore arrangements with local universities for assistance in producing original videotapes for client education.

Videotapes will be used widely

Although purchasing video cassette players and television monitors entails a large outlay of money, both Colston and Pogge believe showing videotapes is the most cost-effective approach to client education and much superior to relying on printed materials.

"If you look at the number of people we're reaching, this approach is probably more cost effective than pamphlets," explains Pogge. "Once you've made a videotape, you have it permanently. Pamphlets get depleted. It takes 3,000 pamphlets to reach 3,000 people, but one videotape can reach that same number of people.

"Pamphlets from other governmental sources are disappearing because of budget reductions, and our own in-house printing costs are rising. We can't afford to give clients pamphlets they'll just throw away."

Pogge and Colston do, however, believe in making printed materials available for clients who want them and will use them. For example, at the Tallahassee food stamp office, where one of the video cassette players is located, a table in the waiting room is stacked with Make Your Food Dollars Count brochures for clients to read and take home with them. In offices without equipment, printed materials are used more extensively.

Regardless of cost considerations, the real test of Florida's nutrition education approach is whether clients watch the videotapes and learn from them.

When asked about her reaction to a videotape playing in the Tallahassee food stamp office, Vanessa Edwards, a new food stamp applicant waiting to see an eligibility worker, responded, "Although I may not listen to every word, I listen when I hear something I don't know, and I think, 'That's good. I'll try that.'"

On that particular day, Edwards said she had learned some new facts about types of meat and about how to prepare them. She added that she would like to see a videotape about the food stamp application process since, as a new applicant, she didn't know what to expect.

Responding to Vanessa Edwards' comments, Josie Colston says that while nutrition education is the primary purpose of the videotapes, she would like to include other client messages, such as information about the application process or about what foods can be purchased with food stamps, on the tapes in the future.

"Just think of all the different messages that can be delivered through this medium!" she says.

Staff enthusiastic about the project

Staff at the Tallahassee food stamp office are enthusiastic about the nutrition education project and think it is working well. Pam Freeman, public assistance specialist supervisor, says clients have told her they enjoy the

Right: Barbara Pogge places pins in a Florida map to show locations of food stamp offices having video equipment. Currently 40 offices have equipment for nutrition education messages.

videotapes and ask her when new tapes will be available.

The videotape project is too new to assess its effect on clients' food buying habits yet, but later the Florida food stamp staff is planning to conduct a client survey to evaluate the impact and to solicit topics for future videotapes.

While videotapes are Florida's primary method of delivering nutrition education in food stamp offices, those offices that don't yet have video equipment are not being ignored. A nutrition education contact person has been named in each district office of the Department of Health and Rehabilitative Services and in each food stamp office within the districts.

Since the contact persons are adding nutrition education to their ongoing duties, Barbara Pogge has sent them a list of suggested nutrition education activities that can be accomplished with a minimum of staff time and effort.

Suggested activities include arranging for presentations by local EFNEP aides, displaying posters, stocking waiting rooms with brochures on nutrition education topics, starting "cents-off" coupon exchange bins in waiting rooms, and preparing a monthly bulletin board on timely nutrition topics.

Pogge provides the contact persons with the materials they need to carry out the activities. She mails out a monthly packet to each office with materials on the bulletin board theme of the month. She also orders and supplies posters and brochures, and maintains a resource library in the state office from which local staff can borrow books to assist them in nutrition education activities.

Elderly and disabled clients who receive their food stamps by mail haven't been forgotten either. Pogge is mailing a monthly insert with their food stamp allotments. The inserts are based on the themes of the Make Your Food Dollars Count brochures.

In just a year's time, the Florida staff have made substantial progress toward providing nutrition education to all food stamp clients. They've shown, by example, that it's not necessary to add extra staff to achieve this goal.

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SPECIAL SCHOOL LUNCH ANNIVERSARY ISSUE

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October 1986 Volume 16 Number 4

Celebrating 40 Years of School Lunch

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Celebrating 40 Years of School Lunch

What's new in school lunch? Compared to the early days, a great deal.

There's more variety in foods served, more attention to what students like and don't like, and more interest in teaching children about food and nutrition. There's also much more emphasis on "merchandising" school meals and on improving and streamlining school lunch program management.

This year the National School Lunch Program celebrates its fortieth anniversary. In honor of this anniversary, we are devoting this issue of FOOD AND NUTRITION to school lunch, with articles that highlight the work of several school lunch directors.

While these are just a few of the many school food service directors who have built successful lunch programs, their efforts illustrate the diversity, creativity, and professionalism that characterize school lunch in the 1980's.

Variety and Choice Are Keys to Success In Cobb County

Mary Nix (left) has been food service director in Georgia's Cobb County for 11 years. Her award-winning program serves more than 42,000 lunches in 68 schools each day.

If you spent your early years washing pots and pans, making things "spic and span" might become a way of life. And that's exactly what has happened to Mary Nix, Cobb County, Georgia, school food service director, whose food service operation in metropolitan Atlanta sparkles and shines.

"By washing pots and pans in high school, I grew up dealing with school food service," Nix says. "So I can say that I've worked in literally every phase of the school lunch program."

A former president (1980-81) of the American School Food Service Association, Nix became director of food service in Cobb County in 1975. In 1980, she won the prestigious Silver Plate Award from the International Food Service Manufacturers Association for elementary and secondary schools in recognition of the quality of her food service. She has run out of wall space to hang all her awards.

"When I first started in Cobb County, we had a solid base to build upon," Nix says. "We focused on developing a system of accountability that would allow the school food managers to maintain their own style of leadership. We wanted them to have a simple system that would free them to manage their programs."

Serves a fast-growing county

In Cobb, one of the nation's fastest growing counties, Nix has faced tremendous challenges. During her tenure, the school system has grown from 35,000 to 55,000 children, and the schools have moved from offering one menu to many choices.

More than 42,000 lunches are served at 68 schools each day. The schools average higher than 75-percent participation in the school lunch program. Since less than 10 percent of the students receive free or reduced-price meals, creative Cobb managers prove you can break even with a limited amount of federal reimbursement.

To deal with the demands of running a large food service operation, Nix sets guidelines for budget, meal patterns, and productivity while delegating the responsibility for individual operations to the school food service managers. She wants managers to develop programs specifically for their clients—the students.

"The emphasis is on developing controls at the point of delivery," she says. "The decisions I make are not as important as those made where the food is served. We provide technical assistance to help the food service managers implement programs that are

effective for their communities."

For example, the Cobb system does not have centralized menus. "We want every school to plan its own meals," Nix says, "because there's a big difference in preferences at each school."

Walton High is a good example

A good example of Nix's decentralized approach is Walton High School, a 1984 Georgia School of Excellence, located in an Atlanta suburb.

Walton offers a variety of food choices. Imagine a menu with rib-eye steaks, eggs benedict, grilled fish, "Buffalo" chicken wings, and a 50-item salad bar. These items, which sound more at home in a trendy restaurant than a school cafeteria, are only part of the variety and quality served to 1,500 students at Walton.

There are five serving lines, including a dinner line, where a traditional school lunch menu with at least two entrees is offered, and a specialty line that contains two types of pizzas. A short-order line offers hamburgers, foot-long hot dogs, chicken filets, and milkshakes. Another line has deli sandwich items, and students also have a variety of choices from a soup-and-salad line.

Special menus offer additional choices. Once a week the lunchroom has Mexican day featuring burritos stuffed with fillings students choose themselves. Crab salad is offered twice a week, and ethnic foods are served often.

Some of the other unusual foods served at Walton include pasta salads, kiwi fruit, fresh mushrooms, corn beef, bagels, sweet and sour pork, grilled liver, and french onion soup. Because there are a significant number of Jewish students and faculty, a number of Jewish foods are served during religious holidays.

"With as much variety as we serve, it's very difficult for finicky eaters not to find something they like," says Pat Trapanese, Walton food service manager.

Staff emphasizes nutrition education

Trapanese and her staff work with the faculty to emphasize nutrition education for the students. "In addition to working with coaches and preparing pre-game meals for athletes, we try to talk to students individually about nutrition," Trapanese says. "The students will remember the foods they enjoy, but it is up to us to teach them about the nutrients the foods contain."

Trapanese thinks serving kids ought to be fun. "Because it's such hard work, we might as well enjoy it," she says.

"The staff is to be commended for the variety of foods they serve at Walton," Nix says. "You work hard to please high school students because they are familiar with the latest food trends. We've also worked to make gradual changes in the way foods are prepared by reducing the amount of fat and salt."

Food service workers use the batch cooking method to prepare food as it is needed. Most food items are prepared on site with very few leftovers. The staff carefully observes where items are picked up most frequently on the serving line. "Part of merchandising is knowing where to place certain food items for maximum exposure," Nix says.

Managers encouraged to stress quality

Mary Nix marches to her own beat. She has put into place ideas that were completely unorthodox because, as she likes to say, "we didn't know it wasn't supposed to work." For example, she encourages managers to use the more expensive brand-name product if it is of much better quality. She has found that the increase in cost for name brands will usually be covered by added food sales.

Nix is very choosy when it comes to using products and uses USDA commodities extensively. USDA-donated tomato paste, beef, cheese, and flour go into delicious homemade pizza. Donated sweet potatoes are used for sweet potato bars with toppings and sweet potatoes baked in homemade pie shells—both student favorites.

Nix has not followed the trend toward self-service that is popular in many areas of the Southeast. She prefers traditional serving lines because she feels they are faster, easier to clean up, and more sanitary. She also feels they make it easier to control portion size.

A key to the success of the Cobb County school food service is involving local managers in decision-making. Nix

has an eight-member "Magic Committee" comprised of food service managers who serve without extra pay on a rotating, yearly basis.

They evaluate bids on products and make suggestions on equipment purchases and food service operations. The group recommends to the Cobb County school board what products to buy and helps evaluate products through taste tests.

"If we involve the managers, who are responsible for participation and plate waste, they become intent on improving the quality of their products," Nix says.

Training is a high priority

Training is also an integral part of Mary Nix's management philosophy. Each school food manager must complete 180 hours of training, some equivalent to college coursework. Every employee must complete annually a minimum of 12 hours of training in nutrition, sanitation, food preparation, and public relations. There are also manager meetings devoted to program improvements.

Nix has gotten positive results from her training efforts. She says she has seen the pride level increase tremendously and the skill level of the food service managers improve. "The bottom line is that a program succeeds when the staff is excited about serving young people and committed to finding better ways to do it," she says.

"We've seen food service managers with average programs improve the quality of their systems when they and their staff developed enthusiasm and showed they cared about school food and the people they serve. There are many intangibles in the food service industry. But there's no substitute for enthusiasm!"

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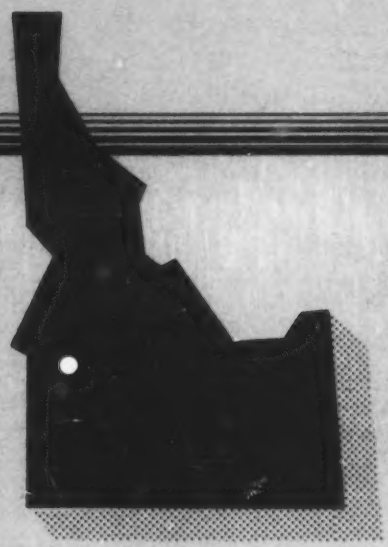
article by Steve Watson and Kent Taylor
photos by Kent Taylor

Modernizing Makes A Difference in Meridian, Idaho



Noreen Larsen has been food service director in Meridian, Idaho, for just 3 years. In that short time, she's managed to make changes that, as one state official puts it, "have rapidly moved Meridian into the 20th century."

Larsen was new to school food service when she first came to Meridian, although she had managed a hospital program before. "I wasn't sure how to start," she says, but she focused on increasing participation and balancing the books. District participation was 60 percent at best when she started.

Larsen's first attempt to attract more customers, she recalls, was to offer chocolate milk once a week to elementary students and more often to older children. She also switched from a mix to a bottled catsup. "These may seem like small changes," she says, "but they brought more kids into the lunch lines."

She next borrowed an idea from neighboring Boise district and began having student taste panels. Now students choose which brands they like. "This information is really valuable," says Larsen. "We really didn't know what they wanted. The students' preferences were usually different from the choices of teachers and staff."

Students suggested Larsen add more fresh fruits and vegetables, tossed salads, and fast-food-type items. She finds students accept these better than the casserole dishes previously offered.

Participation has grown steadily

"We've seen participation grow steadily," Larsen says. She serves nearly 5,000 reimbursable lunches a day, up 1,000 since she started. She feels the most significant reason for improvement has been the addition of self-service bars and the aggressive nutrition education program she uses to support them.

"Through nutrition education, we show the children how to make good choices," she says.

Larsen began adding self-serve bars 2 years ago, one school at a time, and expects to have them running at all 19 schools by the end of this school year. She first introduces salad bars, then adds potato, pasta, taco, deli, and hot dog bars.

Despite all these changes, she has managed to keep lunch costs within the students' reach. Lunches are an affordable $.80 for elementary students and $1.05 for high school students.

Putting in salad bars and teaching in classrooms has taken a lot of Larsen's time. She says computerizing many of her operations has freed time for these activities. In fact, Larsen made the move to computers at the same time she brought in the salad bars.

She had been interested in computers before she came to Meridian, she says, but had "zero experience" using them. She was prepared to spend plenty of time researching what she needed and how to set up the system. She was confident that, once installed, the computers could save time and money.

Investment has been worthwhile

On inventories alone, the improvement is dramatic. When Larsen started at Meridian, one person had worked full time on the district's inventory. Even with full-time attention, the inven-

tory report was completed only twice a year, and the information was outdated before Larsen saw it. "It was inefficient," she says, "and it was difficult to plan or do bid buying with that set up."

With the computer system now in place, Larsen can do a lot more than track inventory. She chose software that was easily adapted to her needs, with a little help from others in the district. She has been able to expand one program to keep track of vendor lists, billing, ordering, and purchasing.

The program also produces a report that calculates the cost of each item, and it will also tell which foods are most popular with students. It will even compute the average monthly cost for meals served.

Larsen uses a second computer program for working with applications for free and reduced-price meals. In addition to storing records and figuring eligibility, the program can print out lists of eligible students. Larsen sends these lists to each manager weekly.

She uses a third software package to prepare salary schedules and budgets, forecast expenses, and prepare spread sheets and graphs that help her identify trends and analyze data. The staff person whose time was previously devoted to tracking inventory manually now enters data into the computer and produces a variety of reports with it.

Cost comparisons help schools save

Much of the information in the reports is broken out by school and shared with the managers so they can compare their costs to other schools'. Larsen says managers can now see if they need to bring certain costs down and where they might cut expenses.

Larsen, too, cuts costs using information from the computer reports. With current inventory information available at all times, she can better calculate how much of any item she will need over the course of the year. She can use bid buying to cut her purchasing costs.

"It takes more time," she says, "but the savings are definitely worth it. I save between $3.00 and $5.00 per case."

Although the initial costs of acquiring a computer may seem high, Larsen feels the system pays for itself quickly. In addition to the savings realized from bid buying, other money is saved as a result of improved accounting. "We had a billing error from our dairy supplier, which we probably wouldn't have caught without the computer. The savings from finding that one error paid for our software."

Larsen cautions that computerization may not be for everyone. "You have to be really interested," she says, "or you could end up with a system you won't use. I recommend that anyone who is interested explore what other districts are doing. See if their system works and if they like it."

Larsen's future goal is to continue to increase participation. Larsen says she "won't be satisfied until it's 100 percent." Because she can rely on the computer, she expects to have the time to continue working with the students and her staff to get more students to buy lunch.

Ideas from other districts helpful

Larsen is looking for a way for a computer or cash register to relay participation and revenue data from each school directly to her computer. This would eliminate entering the data into her system and would increase accuracy. She's still exploring how to do it and hopes she'll find someone who has some suggestions.

"I've borrowed lots of ideas from other districts, and I'm always looking for something I can use. I don't want to re-invent the wheel. And if someone else can benefit from what I'm doing, that's just great."

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article by Dee Amaden

Changes Save Time And Win Customers In Phoenix Schools

When Dave Caldwell took over as food service director for the Washington School District in Phoenix 5 years ago, he made sweeping changes in the program. Applying principles he had used in the private sector, he set about building what is today a very large, popular, and financially sound food service operation.

"Coming here from a food service background at Greyhound Food Management and a number of restaurants, maybe my approach is not the same as someone brought up in school lunch," says Caldwell.

"We're always looking for ways to upgrade our product and at the same time make our program more cost effective in order to keep prices down." Many of the changes Caldwell has made do both. He feels the Washington District is fairly typical and that most lunch programs could adopt his ideas.

Changes simplify meal preparation

There are 21,000 students in the district's 32 schools. Five schools are junior highs with seventh and eighth grade only, and the rest are elementary schools with kindergarten through sixth grade. There are no high schools in the district.

When Caldwell became food service director, half of the schools had fully equipped kitchens where they prepared food for their students and for one other school.

Caldwell decided to have all schools serve lunches assembled on site using mostly heat-and-serve and convenience foods. This has simplified preparation, cut down on the amount of equipment needed, and dramatically

luced labor costs.

While food costs are higher with the nvenience foods, savings from the nplified preparation more than com-nsate for the increase. The heat-d-serve meals assure consistent ality at all schools and offer greater enu flexibility.

All of Caldwell's schools offer four trees each day. Two of the en-es—peanut butter and jelly sand-ches and hamburgers—are offered ily. The other two entrees change m day to day.

On Monday, the entrees might be en-baked chicken and Sloppy Joes; esday, cheese enchiladas and corn gs; Wednesday, bologna and eese sandwiches and breaded fish; ursday, chicken nuggets and spa-etti with meat sauce; Friday, pizza d tacos. The daily menu always in-udes a potato product, fruit juice, lk, tossed salad, and either a vege-ble or fruit selection.

The added variety, Caldwell feels, ays off in greater participation. More an 65 percent of the students eat hool meals. Eighty-seven percent of e meals served are sold at full price.

Giving students the freedom to serve emselves wherever possible saves bor costs and food. "We don't have a erson on the line, for example, giving ach child two pickle slices. Those ho want pickle slices help them-lves," says Caldwell.

ther improvements so save money

In addition to changes on the food ne, a number of behind-the-scenes nprovements make the lunch program ore cost effective. For example, sing disposable plates, cups, and tensils eliminates dishwashing equip-ent, saves labor costs, and has cut ome kitchen utility bills in half. Limit-g lunch ticket sales from daily to vice per week has cut clerical staff ours.

Staff time required to prepare meals as been reduced more than 50 per-ent, from as high as 54 staff hours per ay in some schools to an average of 8 to 20 hours. The smaller staffs are nore easily supervised so each man-ger oversees two or three schools in-

Every day is special for school lunch customers in Phoenix's Washington District, but barbecue days have added appeal. Students get to eat some of their favorites—like charcoaled hamburgers—outside on the lawn with their friends.

stead of one, resulting in a savings of more than 50 percent.

As the program becomes more streamlined and workers more experienced, manpower requirements continue to drop, Caldwell says. "In one school, we've got three employees serving lunch to 250 children, and they're only there a couple of hours."

Single vendor supplies food

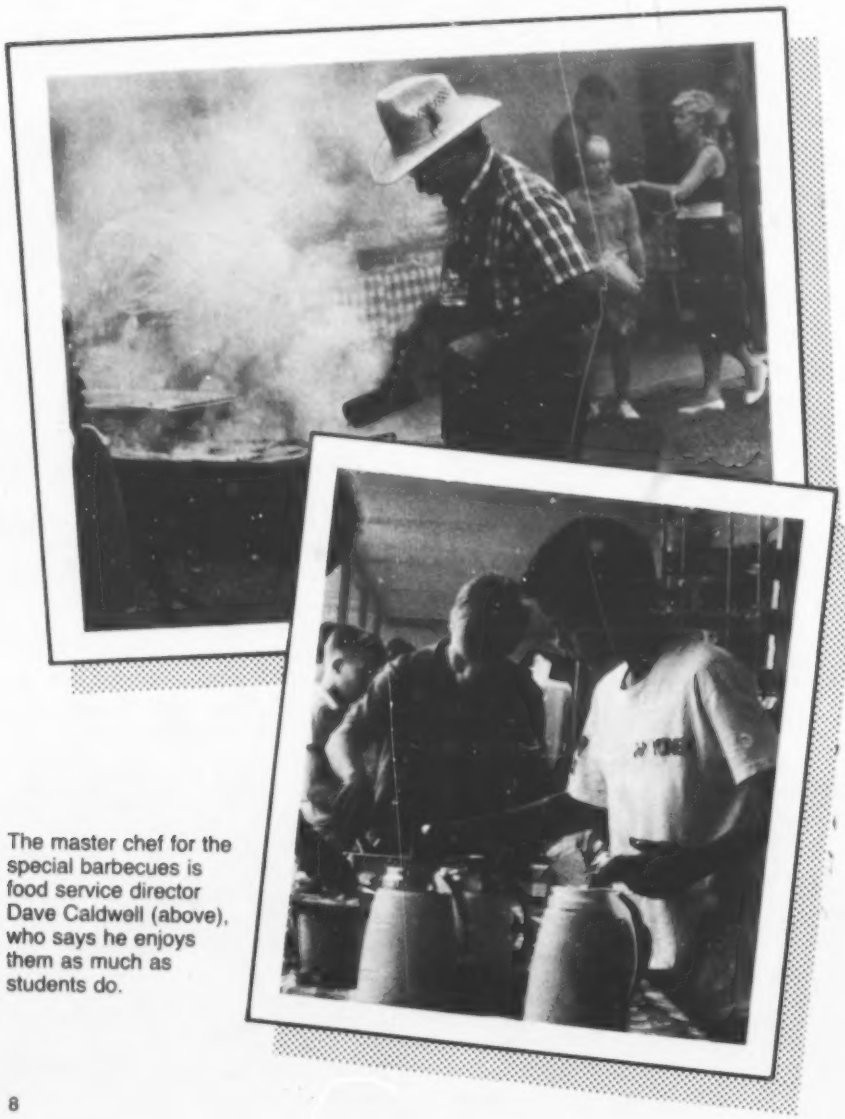
The Washington School District awards an annual contract to a single vendor to supply virtually all the food for the school year. Throughout the year, individual school managers deal directly with the vendor for deliveries to their schools.

With this arrangement, Caldwell says he is able to purchase at lower prices than with central purchasing from several vendors. In addition to the cost advantage, the ordering and billing is greatly simplified, and the food is delivered to each school, when needed.

The only foods now stored by the district are USDA commodities. Limiting stored items has enabled Caldwell to turn back to the district central warehouse space, reduce the district warehouse staff, and significantly reduce the district's delivery costs.

The school district buys the best food it can. "The few pennies saved on a lesser product are a false economy," says Caldwell. "I believe you have to really merchandise your lunch, and it doesn't make any sense to put watered-down ketchup on a great french fry."

In addition to cost-conserving ideas, Caldwell has initiated several income-producing activities. The food service section caters school functions like graduation, luncheons, and parent-teacher association meetings.



The master chef for the special barbecues is food service director Dave Caldwell (above), who says he enjoys them as much as students do.

There are many signs of success

Caldwell points to a number of indicators of the success of the Washington program:

- Two-thirds of the district's children participate, even though only a small percentage receive free or reduced-price meals.
- The program covers its own food and labor costs and has kept the price of a full-cost lunch at 75 cents.
- Added choice and self-service have cut plate waste dramatically. "Our garbage cans are full of paper," says Caldwell, "not food."

Caldwell expects to add to these accomplishments next year. "I don't think any one thing we're doing is unique," he says. "You just have to keep track of what other schools are doing and take and use those ideas that work for you."

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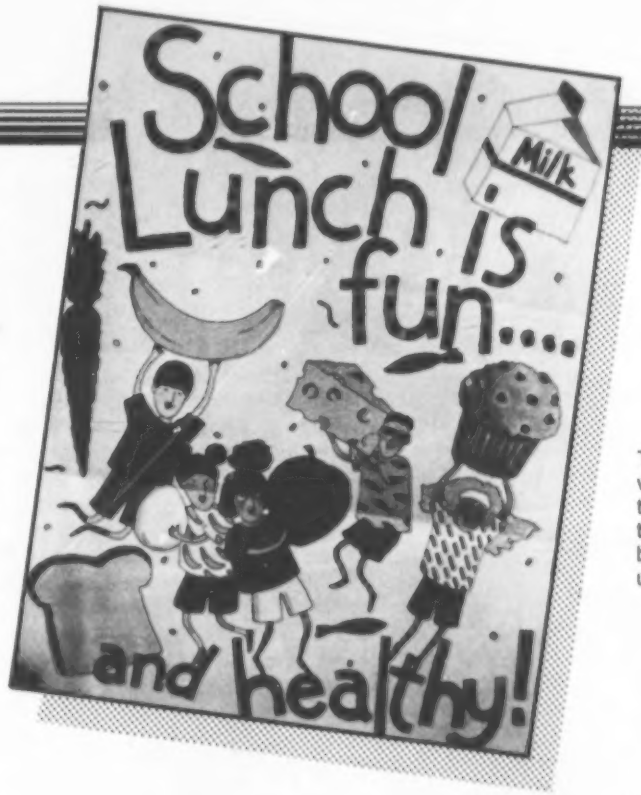
article and photos by Tino Serrano

(Note: The Washington School District was one of the original school districts that participated in the nutrient standard menu planning project described on page 11 of this issue.)

Test Kitchens Insure Quality School Lunches



This poster from Louisville reflects the goal of the food service staff: to serve meals that are both good for and popular with the students.

Over the years, school lunch directors have become increasingly sensitive to the likes and dislikes of their student customers. Just as food manufacturers and distributors put time and effort into testing new items before putting them on the market, many school food service people are testing foods before introducing them in their lunch programs.

Two test kitchens in the Southeast—a county-operated kitchen in Louisville, Kentucky, and a state-run kitchen in Raleigh, North Carolina—are good examples of innovative approaches to food testing and food service training.

Louisville kitchen is a recent addition

The test kitchen and learning center in Louisville is part of the Jefferson County school system. It was the idea of food service director Jay Caton, who saw a need for better quality control in school meals.

"We needed a place to test and compare food samples for consistency and acceptability," he explains. "With 135 school locations, it's difficult to have standard quality throughout our system, especially since we have a relatively small field staff of consultants for the schools. We also needed a place for hands-on experience and training on food preparation, sanitation, and safety."

Completed in 1985, the test kitchen is part of a large classroom that can be divided into three sections. Up to 100 people can attend classroom training while 25 are in the test kitchen.

Before the test kitchen existed, food service staff tested food samples at each school. Now food samples are picked up at a number of schools, brought into the test kitchen, and analyzed for quality.

"Introducing new products is one of the most important functions of our test kitchen," says Cheryl Sturgeon, coordinator of food service operations for the Jefferson County schools.

During what's called "happy food service hour," a monthly event at the test kitchen, food brokers and manufacturers show off their products to local school food managers. "In the past," says Sturgeon, "our managers had no place to see or test new products. Now they can come to happy food service hour and be updated on the latest food trends."

Test equipment as well as products

Product testing goes on throughout the year. "In March," says Sturgeon, "we may decide to test all french-fry products that are approved for the schools." Evaluation panels include school and state food service personnel, parents, and of course, students.

"We have to be sure that the students themselves have a part in determining food quality for their meals," Sturgeon says.

Private industry has been generous in donating food service equipment and in providing representatives for equipment maintenance seminars. A donated video camera is used to tape sessions for employees unable to come in for training.

"Not only do we stay up to date on the latest food trends, but we also test the latest in kitchen equipment," says Sturgeon. "For example, we have a tilting braising pan, which we have ordered for some of our larger kitchens, that eliminates the need for large ranges."

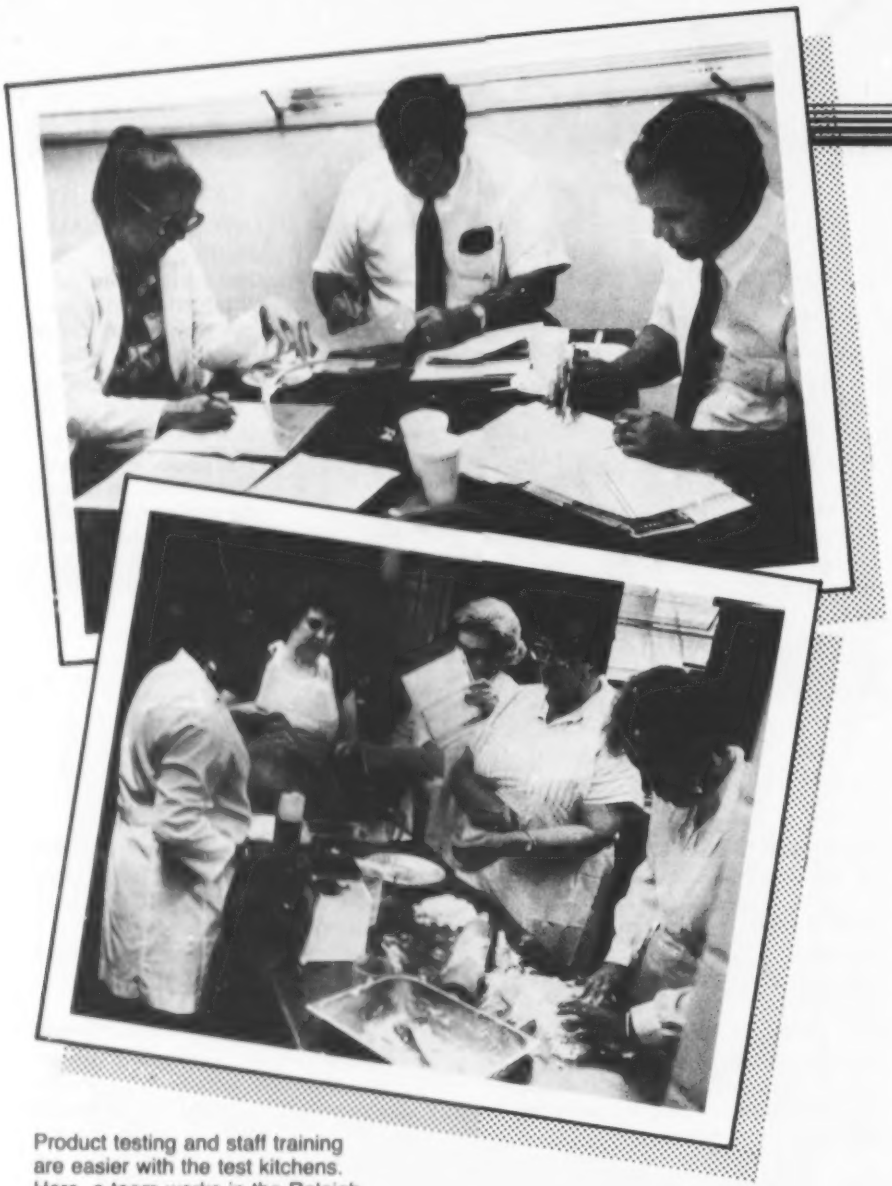
School food managers are required to take training each year at the test kitchen. Along with courses on food and equipment, there is instruction on stress reduction, time management, and building a positive self-image. Local chefs conduct sessions on merchandising and using garnishes. As an incentive to participate, managers can earn bonus pay for completing optional training.

The kitchen is also used to test new recipes or modify traditional ones. The goal is to insure consistent meal quality and to minimize costs while making meals more acceptable to students.

Adding variety is also a goal

"We need to reach out to our customers without jeopardizing nutrition," says Jay Caton. "One of the challenges today is to maintain high quality with the best tasting product and provide it at a reasonable cost to the paying child."

Caton feels the offer versus serve



Product testing and staff training are easier with the test kitchens. Here, a team works in the Raleigh kitchen.

option, which allows students to choose three or more of the five available food items, is one of the best ideas to come into school food service.

"Another good idea," he says, "is the use of USDA commodities for preparing a la carte items. For example, we process figs, honey, and flour into individually wrapped fig bars that the kids really like. We need to recognize that not every child will want a full meal every day, and we must insure that nutritious choices are available."

Students benefit from the test kitchen because of the variety of products that are put on the menu after the testing process. "Managers have more items for their own individual choice menus as a result of what we show them in the test kitchen," says Brenda Richardson, coordinator of food procurement.

"This is important since we have found that students in one part of the county may have completely different tastes from the rest of the area."

While schools are competing with fast food restaurants and have to follow fast food trends, Richardson says, many students are also placing more emphasis on 'light' foods. "For instance," she says, "we have healthy a la carte items such as all-natural yogurt to go along with our salad bars. "We also have less salt and fat in our cooking, serve multi-grain products, and have cut back on desserts. Using tilting braising pans reduces the amount of deep-fat frying while keeping in more nutrients."

Richardson has helped implement a Fitness and Nutrition (F.A.N.) Club in Jefferson County middle schools. Students assess their physical fitness levels and develop individual plans to meet their nutritional needs.

The schools have incorporated nutrition education activities into a number of subject areas. In some activities, for example, students keep diaries of what they eat, count calories, and make charts of physical fitness levels. They also learn about the foods of other cultures, make cookbooks and plan menus, and learn about the nutrient content of various foods.

Raleigh kitchen is also thriving

North Carolina's state kitchen, like Jefferson County's, helps local food service directors meet the demands of sophisticated consumer taste preferences. "The students are our customers, and they keep us in business," says North Carolina state child nutrition director John Murphy. "We want to meet their needs, and our test kitchen helps us do that."

Murphy admits that commercial food service is aggressive in vying for school-aged customers. He depends on the training lab to keep staff competitive in serving quality meals in North Carolina schools.

Located at the state child nutrition office in Raleigh, the test kitchen was set up in 1980 to test and develop standardized recipes for school cafeterias, and to train school food service staff in food preparation and equipment use and care.

Workshops are held once a month on topics such as merchandising, efficient quantity food production, and special service arrangements, such as salad bars. The lab is designed to accommodate 8 to 11 persons at one time. Usually 21 people attend the workshops, and hands-on lab experiences are rotated among two groups.

Training coordinator Paula Tillman conducts the 2- to 3-day sessions. "We

operate under the train-the-trainer concept—that is, participants go back and teach others about what they learned. We use the lab as a training station to put innovations into practice. We will test an idea here before it is tried in a school," Tillman says.

The North Carolina test kitchen was used to test recipes for the innovative "School Recipe Portfolio," developed by eight Southeastern states. This full-color merchandising manual of standardized school recipes shows how food should look and be displayed on the serving line. All recipes chosen for the book were tested in the lab and adjusted for proper yield, quality, and taste.

Training builds skills and morale

Both Murphy and Caton stress that managing and caring about people are very important factors in having an effective child nutrition program. They believe there has to be a sense of participation for those who work in food service. Workers must feel that they are professionals with specific skills who are performing a major service in education.

"We must manage our resources so that people are rewarded for their work," says Caton. "We want our test kitchen to supplement an expanded professional growth program for employees because the opportunity to improve one's skills is basic.

"Workers' ideas and commitment mean more in the long run than any leadership I could give. If it doesn't happen in the schools, it's not going to happen at all."

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article and photos
by Kent Taylor

Special Project Tests New Way To Plan Meals

Everything's up to date in Kansas City (Missouri)—not only in the lyrics of the Broadway musical but at Hickman Mills Consolidated School District 1, where food service staff are pleased with their alternative lunch program.

Hickman Mills is one of seven districts nationwide still involved in the third year of a pilot project that began in school year 1983–84 with 18 participating school districts across the country. That project—Nutrient Standard Menu Planning—offered selected districts an opportunity to test an alternative to the time-honored school lunch meal pattern.

Meals are planned in different way

Meal pattern planning is currently used by all schools participating in the National School Lunch Program with the exception of those testing the nutrient standard.

With the meal pattern approach, USDA requires school lunch managers to include in each lunch a specified amount of food from each of four food components—meat/meat alternate, vegetable/fruit, bread/bread alternate, and milk. Each lunch includes two servings from the vegetable/fruit component so a complete meal contains five food items.

The nutrient standard system does not use meal patterns. Instead, meals are evaluated for nutrient content. The goal is to meet one-third of the child's Recommended Dietary Allowance (RDA) for eight key nutrients, averaged over the 5-day school week.

If a computer analysis reveals a shortage of one of the nutrients during a particular week, district school lunch directors adjust the menus, recipes, and/or portion sizes to meet the nutrient standard. Standardized menus and recipes are essential to the plan.

As Alberta Frost, director of FNS' Nutrition and Technical Services Division, explains, all of the eight analyzed nutrients are essential for growth and development. They include protein, calcium, iron, vitamin C, vitamin A, thiamin, and riboflavin. Foods containing these nutrients typically contain other nutrients as well. Food energy is analyzed but not monitored.

Introduced in nine Hickman Mills schools

Hickman Mills school food service director Betty Culley sees both advantages and disadvantages to using the nutrient standard system. On balance, however, she's enthusiastic about the system and feels it offers a viable alternative for schools suited to using it.

Nine of the 11 Hickman Mills schools—seven elementary and two junior high schools—are participating in the pilot project. When the nutrient standard system was introduced, the district used brochures and school newsletters to inform teachers, students, parents, and the community that the new alternative was being tested.

According to representatives from FNS' Mountain Plains regional office who have monitored the project, cafeteria staff were resistant at first but are now supportive, and student acceptance has been good.

NUTRIENT STANDARD MENU PLANNING NUTRIENT STANDARD

FNS staff have noticed a number of changes in the district's program as a result of the new approach. The district uses increased quantities of commodities such as peanut butter and raisins (to help meet the iron requirement) and increased quantities of fruits and vegetables. On the other hand, use of meat and meat alternates has decreased, as has the number of bread servings.

Initially, FNS staff helped train local staff. At that time, the Missouri Department of Elementary and Secondary Education closely monitored the new program on a weekly basis. They now make a monitoring visit and audit the program once a year, forwarding their reports to the FNS regional office.

Actual testing ended last year, but Hickman Mills is still refining the program to suit its needs.

Computer analysis is key to system

One of the benefits of the project for Hickman Mills and other participating districts was an opportunity to work with computers in a new way.

While a few districts did not use computers in the project, most used either mainframe or microcomputers together with software developed by USDA. Schools using computers had the most success with nutrient standard planning; districts testing the manual method found it was not practical because it was tedious and error prone.

Along with software, USDA provided a data base that included information on the nutrient content of more than 1,100 frequently used foods. District supervisors added to the data base information on other foods their schools use, including commercially processed foods.

If necessary, districts modified the USDA software for use with their equipment. Modifications were needed primarily in districts with mainframe computers. Betty Culley adapted the software for use with a Radio Shack Model 16 computer. She says the computer has not only helped her with meal planning but also with the documentation needed for the nutrient standard project.

While the nutrient standard system has worked well in districts like Hickman Mills, it's not likely to be offered indiscriminately as an option to all schools because of its unique requirements.

As Stella Nash of Mountain Plains explains, the nutrient standard requires standardized recipes, good computer support, and specialized software. It also requires time and money for training and implementation. It doesn't, for example, lend itself readily to one-cook schools. It also doesn't work very well in schools that offer students a wide variety of menu choices, such as schools offering salad bars or bag lunches.

Advantages include added flexibility in using recipes and ingredients and an opportunity to serve a greater variety of locally popular foods. Because schools use weekly averaging with the nutrient standard approach, they can also make changes that may save on food costs.

Serving smaller portions of meat or meat alternates and fewer bread servings per week has made a difference at Hickman Mills. District schools have saved as much as 7 cents per serving for chili (27 cents per serving under the traditional meal pattern, 20 cents per serving now) and 12 cents per serving for spaghetti sauce (26 cents formerly, 14 cents now).

Considerable time required at first

Culley echoes the need for spending time preparing materials and training staff. "You may think your recipes are already standardized," she says. "However, you'll find that a lot of the basic foods you serve—such as combination salad or cole slaw—are prepared without an actual recipe. And homemade bread recipes vary widely. As their ingredients differ, so do the nutrient contents."

Culley had to narrow down her recipe file initially, deciding which of several similar recipes she wanted to enter into the system. Portion control was suddenly vital. A recipe yield—in actual preparation—was sometimes not correct for the portion control method, and adjustments had to be made.

Menu planning, she has found, is more time consuming for nutrient standard meals than for lunches based on meal pattern requirements. "But," says Culley, "the nutrient standard plan has given our program added nutritional integrity in the community. Also, our menus are now more acceptable to students than those sometimes allowed under meal pattern planning.

"It is my opinion," she says, "that even if nutrient standard doesn't become a general alternative, its development through this study should give valuable insight into possible future changes in the traditional lunch pattern."

By participating in the study, Culley and her staff will help USDA assess the effectiveness of the nutrient standard system. Among other things, the test at Hickman Mills has shown that:

- Kansas City schools could more than adequately meet protein needs at a significantly reduced cost;
- although the number of bread servings per week was reduced, weekly nutrient needs were still met;
- there was an increased concentration on meeting the iron requirement—probably *not* always met adequately by school lunch pattern meals;
- in winter, when frozen vegetables were used more frequently than fresh, adjustments for vitamin A content were sometimes required.

Added flexibility had both pros and cons for Culley. The "good news" was the ease of menu planning with standardized recipes and computer assistance. The "bad news" was the need to plan further ahead and to be more specific about foods on hand. Leftovers were not as easy to use.

Nancy Lovely of the Missouri staff agrees with Culley's assessment that the pilot project has been worthwhile. "It's a good alternative," she says. "We should have it available for our schools. We like the idea of having an option in school meal planning."

For Lovely as well as Culley, the project initially involved extra work. "Monitoring was more intense," she says. "It was a bit more complex, since we had more to look at. A year into the project, we were still finding things we needed to check. Even minor errors in food coding could affect the nutrient analysis. Sour pickles, for example, had more iron than dill pickles. So we'd sometimes go back and take another look at the actual recipes.

"On balance, though, our reaction is positive. Nutrient standard is an option we'd like to see offered more widely."

Missouri authorities and Hickman Mills staff are grateful for the opportunity to participate in the pilot project. From the perspective of their 3-year experience, the study has been profitable.

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article by Joanne Widner

Making the Switch To Nutrient Standard Menu Planning...

Adapting to nutrient standard menu planning was a process that varied in each of the schools participating in the pilot project. Clara McIver, food service director for the Huntington, Long Island, schools, came to the project well prepared by her professional background as a nutritionist. She worked closely with state and federal staff who reviewed the project in the Huntington schools.

During an interview with Wini Scheffler of the Food and Nutrition Service's public information staff, McIver offered personal insights into why she chose to participate, how she managed the technical challenge, and what she thinks of the results.

McIver's district includes a high school, junior high school, and five elementary schools serving a total of 4,500 children. In addition, under a shared service concept, she manages school lunch programs in the neighboring community of Harborfield. Harborfield schools did not take part in the pilot project.

Q When you were advised of the pilot study by the New York State Department of Education, you chose to participate, even though it would mean changing a comfortable routine. What motivated you to take on the challenge?

A As a nutritionist, I was interested in measuring more precisely whether our lunches were meeting one-third of the Recommended Dietary Allowance (RDA) of nutrients. Especially at the elementary level where the menus were simple, I was concerned that children often did not eat vegetables, except those served raw or in soup. I thought the nutrient standard would give us greater flexibility to offer foods they like that also supplied the needed nutrients. I also had an ulterior motive. I saw the need to automate more of our management functions, and participating in the study meant acquiring my own computer.

Q What were the problems in adopting a complex new system of meal planning?

A We had to switch to completely computerized planning and that involved a horrendous amount of work as well as intensive staff training.

The biggest challenge was to enter all our recipes into the software provided by USDA. When I began reviewing the recipes and their yield, I was surprised to find that the taste and yield varied among kitchens. It turned out that institutional cooks share the tendency most of us have—after we've made a dish repeatedly, we are less likely to follow the recipe exactly.

Just as we abandon teaspoon measures for a pinch or sprinkle, they might substitute a handful for half a cup. We had to instruct all the cooks in the district to use the precise ingredients and amounts listed in the recipes.

We also had to get information from all our vendors as to the nutrients in the processed foods we purchase, an even harder task. Fortunately, the data base from USDA contains the nutrient content of most of the foods we commonly use.

Q Some schools dropped out of the pilot study, finding it too time-consuming or otherwise unsuitable for their districts. What would you say are the requirements for successfully adopting the nutrient standard approach?

A One thing that helped us was to introduce nutrient standard planning gradually. I started at the high school level because my office is there and I could provide close supervision. I found three factors to be essential.

First, you have to have the computer equipment and expertise within your district. The food service people who review our programs know what they need as output, but they can't help a lot on what must be put in.

The first thing I did was ask our district computer coordinator to recommend one of the brightest kids in the computer class to help me. The boy, Bill Deegan, did a super job. Bill even modified the program to suit our needs. For instance, he adjusted it to automatically enter items offered every day. The job was a good opportunity for Bill, as well. The work became so interesting to him that he decided to specialize in computer engineering when he enters college this September. I have hired another student to replace him.

The second factor is a willingness to spend a lot of time checking to ensure menu and recipe files are uniform and correctly coded.

Finally, you have to devote time, effort, and money to thorough in-service training. This includes not only working with the managers, cooks, and bakers, but ensuring that cashiers know which selections may be counted as a meal.

Q Did you find it necessary to make any adjustments in the lunch program?

A Yes, we made changes in the way we offer lunches to students. For some time, we've used the offer versus serve option, which allows students to refuse part of the meal, although they still pay full price.

In schools using meal patterns, offer versus serve allows students to take as few as three of the five food items that make up the meal. For example, on a day hamburgers are served, a student could take a hamburger on a bun, a half-pint of milk, and have three of the five required food items—meat, bread, and milk.

With nutrient standard, however, students must take a certain number of *menu* items. During the first 2 years we participated in the nutrient standard project, children had to take at least three menu items under offer versus serve.

This meant that in a nutrient standard school, a child selecting a hamburger on a bun would have to take two other items—milk, for instance, and dessert—because the hamburger and bun together were one menu item. This forced some children to take more food than they would with the meal pattern, and the result was increased waste and expense.

A year ago last spring, a team of federal and state monitors visited the district to survey on site what children took and ate. Instead of a straight average of the choices the children could take, we did a weighted average based on how many of each item children were actually taking.

As a result of this survey and reports from other schools, USDA began allowing nutrient standard districts to let children take as few as two menu items, as long as one was the entree. This makes sense because with nutri-

ent standard the entree contains the major portion of the nutrient content of the lunch. And the entree plus one other item, such as milk, provides an adequate lunch.

Of course, we encourage children to take more than two items because the more items taken, the higher the nutritional content.

Recently, we asked parents from the school's nutrition committee to repeat the survey of what children were eating. We found selections were much the same as a year earlier.

Q Has your overall experience been positive, then?

A Definitely. Once I had the system in the high school functioning, I asked to extend it the second year to the other six schools in the district. I see several advantages.

For one thing, it has improved meal planning. We know we are serving one-third of the RDA. If the computer analysis shows that the menus fail to meet the standard for any nutrient, I adjust them so they will.

However, because I am a nutritionist, there's not a lot of trial and error in menu planning. For instance, I'm conscious of the need to make a special effort to include enough vitamin C and iron. We analyze and adjust the menus for the month in a single morning.

We can also introduce more variety into meals because foods are selected for their nutritional contribution rather than to meet a mandatory meal pattern. All menu items are evaluated regardless of their role in the meal or the portion size.

Being more flexible also makes it easier to involve students in the lunch program. For instance, the youth advisory council recently planned an "Eskimo Day" featuring a complete cold menu of salads—chicken, tuna, fruits, and vegetables—followed by an ice cream cone dessert.

Other promotions sponsored by the council were Florida Citrus Day and Deli Day. Student council members worked with their faculty advisor, art teacher Linda Lutkenhaus, on publicity and decorations. They helped prepare and serve the meals and clean up afterwards.

These activities strengthen our program. More students participate when they see that their ideas count, and higher participation means more income. When we shifted to the nutrient standard, this increase was most noticeable in the elementary schools. Participation went from 50 percent to between 60 and 78 percent. That is high for a school district in which only 13 percent of the lunches are served free or at reduced price.

My goal since I came here has been to teach not only the children, but also their parents, about nutrition. The nutrient standard has given a boost to nutrition education. My staff generated a lot of interest by enlarging and posting a printout of the nutrient content of common menu items.

The school community, parents, and administrators now realize child nutrition is more than pushing food over the counter. After we started with the nutrient standard, the board of education agreed to make nutrition part of the kindergarten through sixth grade curriculum.

Another advantage of the nutrient standard is that program management has benefited from the introduction of automation. We began with USDA software and an Apple computer on loan from the high school computer lab. Last year, I acquired an IBM computer and use it for nutrient analysis and meal planning.

I use it for other administrative purposes also. Every month, using a program Bill developed, I key in our bills, payroll costs, nonfood costs, and income, by category. The computer gives me year-to-date expenses and income, and calculates meals per labor hour, average meal cost, average meal income ... almost anything I need.

Q In the 3 years you have participated in the study have you been satisfied with the level of technical assistance provided?

A Yes, I found both state and federal personnel to be very supportive. I feel comfortable knowing people really want us to succeed.

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interview and photos by Wini Scheffler

Clara McIver (left) and food service manager Eleanor Bratton talk about using nutrient standard menu planning.

Students Celebrate School Lunch in Style

This past spring, third and fourth graders at Marston Elementary School in Hampton, New Hampshire, found an unusual way to celebrate the fortieth anniversary of the National School Lunch Program.

They took a simulated spin in a time machine with special menus and activities arranged by schoolmates to capture the flavor of three decades in school lunch history—the 1940's, the '60s, and the '80s. Each of three shifts of students to pass through the lunch line was served a distinct menu characteristic of one of those decades.

First group got a taste of the '40s

The first children in line for the special anniversary lunch had a typical 1946 menu. While the Andrews Sisters, Artie Shaw, and Glenn Miller crooned in the background, the fourth grade hosts explained a collage they had assembled of fashion, sayings, and celebrities from the postwar years. They also briefed their schoolmates on the early years of the school lunch program.

Each table was supplied with a bowl of peanut butter to spread on homemade whole wheat bread and a bottle of chocolate syrup for their milk and ice cream dessert. The main course was a macaroni-and-beef casserole and green beans.

Ruth Osgood, a guest of honor, felt right at home. From 1945 to 1949, she was part of the staff that prepared meals for the town's three schools.

"We started with a 5-cent cup of cocoa," she recalls. "Later, we added soup and bread and butter. When the federal government began providing support in 1946, we adopted the nutrition standards used nationwide. A complete meal cost only 15 cents, and any children who couldn't pay the price could earn their lunches by helping out in the kitchen."

Students are no longer allowed to work for the cost of their meals, but free and reduced-price lunches have long been available to children from low-income families.

Menus from 1966 and 1986 were next

The next group of children ate a 35-cent 1960's menu to the tunes of the Monkees, the Beatles, and the Beach boys. Their trays were filled with whipped potatoes, Sloppy Joes, green beans, homemade rolls, peaches, and milk.

They heard their schoolmates comment on the 'neat' and 'groovy' world of the '60s portrayed in the poster collage of Nehru jackets, bell bottoms, and flower children. What was history to a 10-year-old was only yesterday to several of the teachers, who came bedecked with bandannas and pendants salvaged from their 'hippie' days.

The last shift of children had an up-to-date menu of French bread pizzas or steak subs, which they munched to the strains of pop rock. They served themselves a tossed salad and corn, strawberries and mandarin oranges; selected chocolate, whole, or lowfat milk; and topped it off with a fudgesicle or brownie. It was still a bargain at 85 cents.

"The key word is choice in today's menus," recited Andre, one of the student hosts. "Fast foods have changed our eating habits," he added, introducing the collage of pictures, sayings, and menus his classmates had gathered to create the '80s image.

"This last group probably enjoyed their meal most," says school food director Nancy Stiles. "The food is more familiar to them. But even with the less popular 1946 and 1966 menus, we matched our usual 75-percent participation. This means the children value the lunchroom for activities as well as for the food."

Activities part of ongoing program

Nutrition education is a focus of many lunchroom activities, and it is here that Stiles has put her personal stamp on the last decade of the lunch program in Hampton's three schools.

Because in many families both parents work, today's youngsters make more of their own food choices, she says. "More than ever, they need to know about good nutrition and how food and exercise affect their health."

To meet this need, Stiles developed a series of week-long mini-courses in nutrition. The children who hosted the special cafeteria program were the last of six classes of fourth graders to complete the course.

As hosts for the day, they dished out the entrees and tidied up the tables. With considerable poise, they used exhibits to share with their schoolmates the lessons they had learned during the week.

Brian used Billie, a cutaway plastic model of the human torso, to trace the path of food through the digestive system.

Pointer in hand, Rebecca explained the six major groups of nutrients printed on another display.

"The mini-course proves that the food service program doesn't have to stand alone but can be linked to the rest of the curriculum," Stiles says. "When teachers and food service staff cooperate, the cafeteria becomes a place to learn and a fun place to be."

Costumes, decorations, and presentations added to the festivities at Marston Elementary's school lunch anniversary celebration. Several teachers, who grew up in the 1960's, dressed as "hippies."

Many teachers use nutrition materials

Although the nutrition lessons fit most readily into the science curriculum, teachers can expand and adapt the material to other subject areas. For instance, a language teacher might assign a composition on a nutrition topic, and an art teacher might choose food themes.

Rosemary Buia, the teacher whose fourth graders helped plan and prepare the anniversary program, says she coordinates studies of the human body with the nutrition lessons.

"The children learn about food groups and the digestive system along with the other body functions, such as respiration. They learn about nutrients and minerals—what they do and where they come from.

"The last 2 days, we focus on what makes a good meal in terms of nutrition, color, and texture. When we talk about snacks, Nancy Stiles brings something like raw turnip with dip and asks the children to guess what it is. It's a way of exposing them to different types of food," Buia explains.

Each class applies what it has learned by planning a meal for their schoolmates. Stiles gives them a choice of food to vote on. "Our class was the only one to offer three different menus because we combined the end of the nutrition education series with our anniversary celebration," says Buia.

Celebration ended with special cake

No birthday celebration is complete without a cake, and the festivities at Marston Elementary were no exception. To finish off the day's events, Stiles had two kinds of cake—an artificial tiered birthday cake rimmed with lights and crowned with a little red schoolhouse, and real cakes she had baked for the occasion.

Iced with the words "40 Years of School Lunch," the real cakes disappeared without a trace as the last of the children carried their empty trays to the kitchen. "Wicked good," they said, echoing the words of the 1986 collage.

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article and photos by Wini Scheffler

Michigan Districts Get More for Less Buying Cooperatively

What is the biggest problem for school food service directors?

"Determining quality," says Vera Jehnsen, former food service director from Oakland County, Michigan. For nearly 25 years, Jehnsen has been involved with a food service cooperative that serves 20 to 25 school districts in Oakland County. "Selecting the best product for the best price is the goal of the cooperative," she says.

An interesting aspect of Oakland County's cooperative is that participating districts bid for food as a group but purchase individually. The arrangement not only gives individual school districts more purchasing power, it also gives school lunch managers valuable experience in evaluating products and purchasing.

Four cooperatives now work together

Oakland County was the first food cooperative of its kind in southeastern Michigan. Since 1965, three neighboring counties—Macomb, Genesee, and Wayne—have followed Oakland's lead and set up similar cooperatives. While each of the cooperatives operates independently, they work together on developing specifications and evaluating food products through what is called the Quad County Purchasing Committee.

The committee, as Genesee County food service consultant Gloria Bourdon explains, is a logical extension of the cooperative buying concept. "Prior to 1981, each cooperative was going through the same product evaluation process, asking the same companies to provide the same samples. We decided we could have one product evaluation and simplify the process."

The committee includes the school food service consultants from each of the four counties, two local food service directors from each county, and industry representatives. Although industry representatives are not required to attend all committee meetings, they do actively participate in writing specifications, setting up evaluation sessions, and putting together workshops.

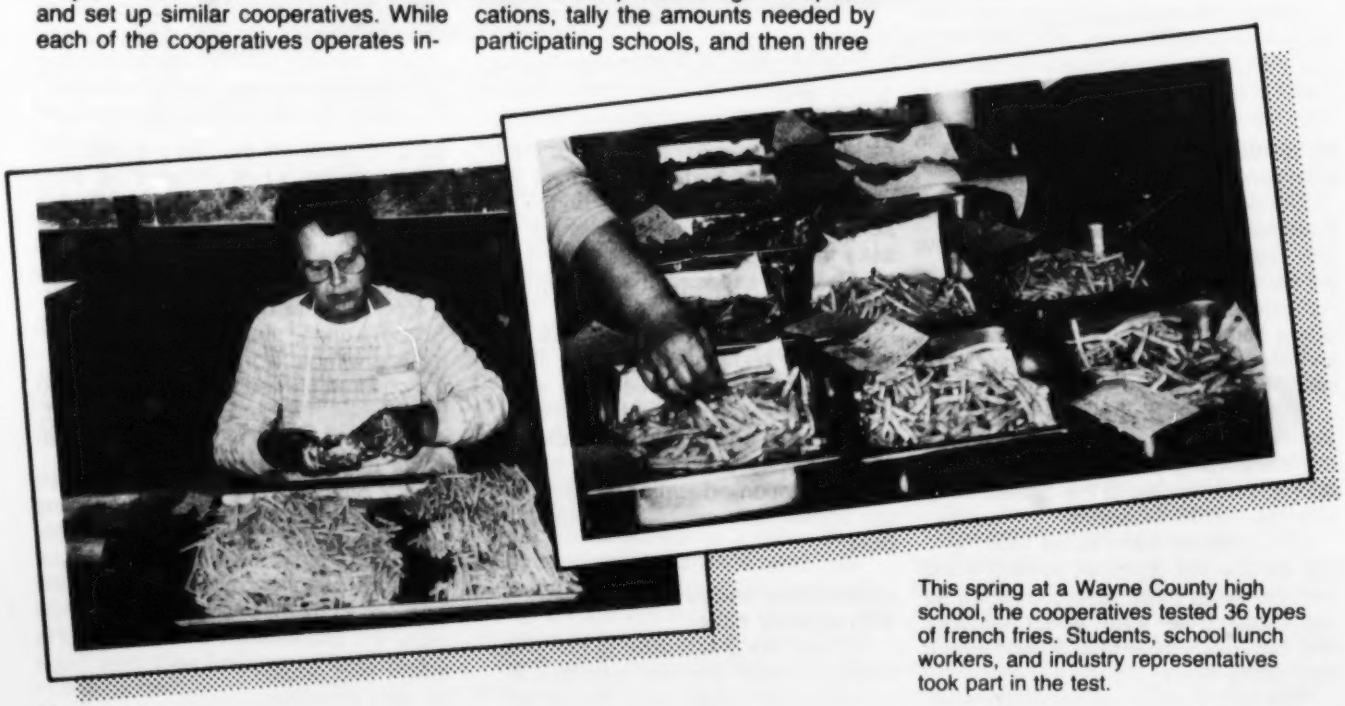
Committee members make up a list of the most often used food products, evaluate the products against specifications, tally the amounts needed by participating schools, and then three times a year put out bid proposals to the suppliers. Suppliers have access to product ratings and are given 2 to 4 weeks to send back their bids. The cooperatives award the bids, but the schools order individually.

Foods evaluated in careful process

"To make the bidding process effective," says Bourdon, "the purchasing committee writes specifications that spell out exactly what the buyer wants. The buyer must determine if the product meets specifications through a product analysis, referred to as cutting, sampling, evaluating, or testing, depending on the type of product involved."

During product analysis, foods available from different food vendors are compared for flavor, color, uniformity, absence of defects, sugar content, consistency, and yield weight. "Without good specifications and product analysis, it is difficult for a school to purchase food that meets program needs," explains Bourdon.

Before the purchasing committee was set up, each county had its own 2-day product analysis with representatives from participating schools testing the samples.



This spring at a Wayne County high school, the cooperatives tested 36 types of french fries. Students, school lunch workers, and industry representatives took part in the test.

"The way we work now is not all that different," says Chacella Russell, Macomb County food service consultant. "The evaluation is done in a day, but the committee spends a great deal of time setting up and later tabulating results. There are more people involved now. In addition to representatives from the schools, we work extensively with industry.

"We operate one product evaluation and each county shares the results. We are not duplicating efforts asking the same vendors for test products. And vendors are willing to give us more information and more samples because they know there are potentially large sales involved."

After the evaluation, bid proposals are sent to the suppliers. Suppliers have the opportunity to know how their product rated with others being considered by the cooperatives. Each cooperative has its own bids and awards contracts to the two or three best companies that will agree to deliver minimum amounts needed by schools.

When schools want to order food, they place their orders directly with one of these suppliers. Because of the evaluations and the carefully worded specifications developed by the committee, school lunch managers know they will be getting a good quality product at a reasonable cost.

Cooperatives offer many advantages

"There are lots of advantages to cooperative purchasing," says Russell. "Small districts can get the latest information on food products, and they can get better quality for better prices. Often food service directors in the smaller districts do not have training in purchasing, nor do they have the time to do extensive evaluations on their own."

As Russell explains, it's not cost effective for small districts to do extensive evaluations, and it can also be difficult for them to get vendors to participate. "Companies do not devote the time to small orders that they do to large ones," she says.

"We like the way our cooperatives are set up because while the bidding process is centralized, schools still have flexibility in ordering and arranging for deliveries," she adds.

Originally, most of the foods the cooperatives bid on were canned goods, such as canned fruits and vegetables, and prepared sauces. Today, there is greater variety, reflecting changing student tastes and new food technology.

For example, because french fries and chicken nuggets are popular items on school lunch menus, the purchasing committee decided to work on specifications and evaluation procedures for these two frozen products.

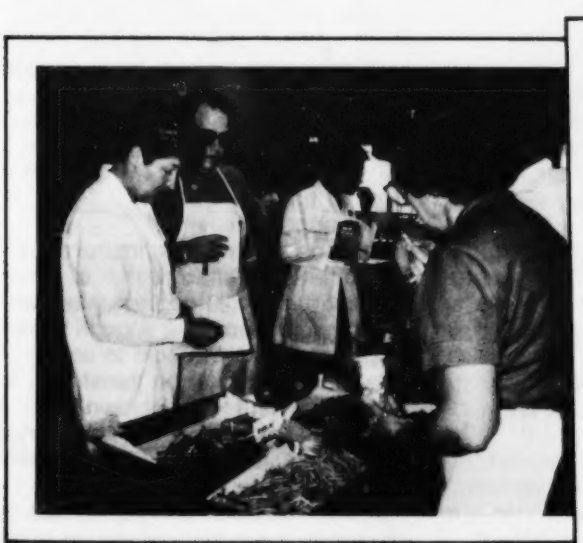
In a special project this past spring, 36 different types of french fries were evaluated for flavor, texture, appearance, and color. Twenty-four home economics students, 36 school lunch workers, and 12 industry representatives participated in the test, which was held at Wayne County's Northville High School.

The process was similar to other evaluations. First, the french fries were counted and checked for length and broken pieces, then prepared according to manufacturer's directions. They were weighed for yield, evaluated for acceptability, and rated as good, very good, or excellent in each of several categories.

Students' reactions were important

Getting students' reactions was an important part of the test. "Kids don't always use the same criteria as adults in judging food," says Barbara Wilson, Wayne County food service consultant. "They come up with some surprising reasons for choosing a particular product, and they tend to like what is closest to what they get in the fast food restaurants.

"For example, they will tell you that even though thicker fries taste more 'potatoey,' they like the smaller pieces because when their friends walk by and take some, they will have more



left. Kids are kids. We have to consider the reality of the way they live."

Students and adults tasted the french fries together in an initial test, then the adults were called back to evaluate how the products held up after several minutes on the serving line. This is important because french fries served in schools are not always eaten immediately.

Following the test, summaries of student and adult evaluations were shared with food service directors and industry representatives. This is done routinely after evaluations.

Committee's work includes training

Participating in evaluations is one way school food service managers can learn more about products and sharpen their buying skills. The cooperatives offer more formal training opportunities as well, both on their own and together.

For example, the purchasing committee has an annual workshop for multi-unit directors. The workshop provides new information on purchasing procedures, rules, and specifications. This is accomplished through keynote speakers, small work groups, product comparisons, industry exhibits, and presentations.

"Helping schools get the best product for the best price has always been the goal of our cooperative," says Barbara Wilson. "Working together, we're doing that by sharing the knowledge, expertise, and experience of the four consultants, school food service representatives, and representatives from industry.

"We have developed specifications we can live with. We share common problems and draw upon each other for solutions. Each group involved has a commitment and a reward."

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article by Mary Jane Getlinger
photos by Vera Jehnsen

Minnesota Computer Student Solves A Lunch Dilemna

"There has to be a better way to count kids in a lunch line!" Those were the words of Ortonville, Minnesota, superintendent Burton Nypen when he filled in for his secretary so she could be treated to lunch downtown on Secretary's Day 8 years ago.

Nypen had to punch more than 350 cardboard tickets for hungry, squirming youngsters at Knoll Elementary School. He also had to take care of students who had forgotten their cards, keep the line moving smoothly, and keep a tally of how many children paid full price, reduced price, or got their lunches free.

"It was impossible," says Nypen. "I did a horrible job!"

At about the same time, the Minnesota Department of Education reviewed Ortonville's food service operation and recommended that more accurate recordkeeping be done.

That was when Curt Johnson, an outstanding Ortonville computer student, came to the rescue. In the fall of 1978, Nypen asked Johnson if he could design a computer program to make school lunch recordkeeping simpler and more accurate.

Things worked together. The Minnesota Council on Quality Education awarded the Ortonville Schools a grant to fund innovative projects, and they used part of it to develop a food service accountability system.

Used a portable computer first

Johnson began by designing a program for the Apple II computer. As a first step, each student was issued an identification card with his or her name and number. Then, a portable computer terminal was set up in the lunchroom.

As the students moved through the line, the secretary typed in their identification numbers and listed the types of lunch they received. The computer kept track of the lunch fee while preserving the anonymity of students receiving free and reduced-price meals. This system worked fairly well, but it was easy to make an error in entering students' identification numbers.

When Curt Johnson graduated from Ortonville High School in 1979, the school district hired him to continue working with computer systems. A year later, he became Ortonville's technology coordinator and decided to make some changes.

"When bar code scanners became available for use with microcomputers," he says, "we decided to modify our program. We modified a Hewlett Packard bar code scanner for the Apple II."

A bar code scanner is a device that uses light to read the thickness of vertical bars and then translates what it has read into letters and numbers. Bar code scanners come in a number of different forms and are commonly seen at grocery stores that have computerized their inventory and check-out systems.

The scanner proved to be easy, quick, and more accurate but it still required that a computer be available in the lunchroom each day. Not only was moving the computer into the lunchroom a difficult task, it was also hard to keep the computer from being banged, jarred, and jostled, and there were problems keeping it functioning properly.

Looked for a better approach

Johnson saw ways to improve his system and set off in search of a bar scanner that would be separate from the computer and small enough to easily carry to the lunchroom to collect data that would later be transferred to a stationary terminal. Johnson found a commercial model, but the $1600 price tag was prohibitive since grant money had by then run out.

In May 1985, Johnson put his talents into action again and decided to build his own bar code scanner. "I ordered parts, put them together, redesigned them a few times, and came up with a

4- by 7-inch box that weighs about 2 pounds," he says. The new equipment cost under $700 and was ready for the 1985–86 school year.

The equipment is compatible with IBM computer systems. In addition to a wand, the bar code scanner has a small keyboard so if students forget their identification cards, the numbers can be looked up on a printout and entered manually. To discourage frequent forgetfulness, however, students must go to the back of the lunch line to be processed manually.

If a student tries to use his or her card a second time during a meal period, a warning light goes on. The box also has a small screen which shows the students' balance. If an account is not paid up, another warning light goes on.

"It is a simpler way to keep accurate records," says secretary Elnor Benkowski, who records daily lunch data. "We know exactly who ate what kind of meal."

The system keeps the daily food service count, which shows how many meals were served at full price, reduced price, or free to participating children and how many meals were served to adults. The system also keeps track of daily cash receipts. It can record up to 1,100 student records per building, and building totals can be combined to give complete food service reports.

Also helpful in other ways

Billing is also simpler with the new system. Ortonville students can pay for their lunches on a weekly basis or their parents can be billed at the end of the month. The computer keeps track of students' lunch accounts and generates statements that are mailed to parents for billing.

A big benefit of the system is that it's easy to use, something that has not gone unnoticed by Superintendent Nypen, who was recently called on again to help out during lunch hour. "It was no problem like it had been a few years ago when I tried to punch tickets," he says.

Thanks to the ingenuity of one of its former students, Ortonville has not only found an easy and accurate way to count kids in a lunch line, but has streamlined recordkeeping and billing as well. A number of Minnesota schools have expressed interest in the system, and the district hopes to interest other schools across the country.

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article by Mary Jane Getlinger
photos by Ortonville Schools

Ortonville technology coordinator Curt Johnson is pictured here using the bar code scanner he designed to simplify school lunch accounting. When students present their cards, he scans the proper meal code with a special wand.

Pasta Bar Is A Student Favorite At Cathedral High

When Frances Ziter, food service director of Cathedral High School in Springfield, Massachusetts, set up a pasta bar in the school dining room, many of her colleagues warned her that the cost would be phenomenal.

"Thanks to donated government commodities, the opposite is true," she says. "The pasta bar actually helps us stay within our budget and offer a wider variety of foods."

Cathedral High School is a private school that draws its 2,029 students from 31 towns and cities in Massachusetts and Connecticut. The Cathedral school food service also handles menu planning, finances, and some food preparation for Our Lady of Hope, an elementary school with an enrollment of 403.

The popular pasta bar is one of the changes that have enabled Ziter and her staff of 23 to achieve a fully self-supporting food service that is popular with students.

"We cater to the tastes of our students just as any restaurant seeks to please its customers," she says. Ziter pleases her customers by offering foods they like, keeping prices low, and practicing good public relations.

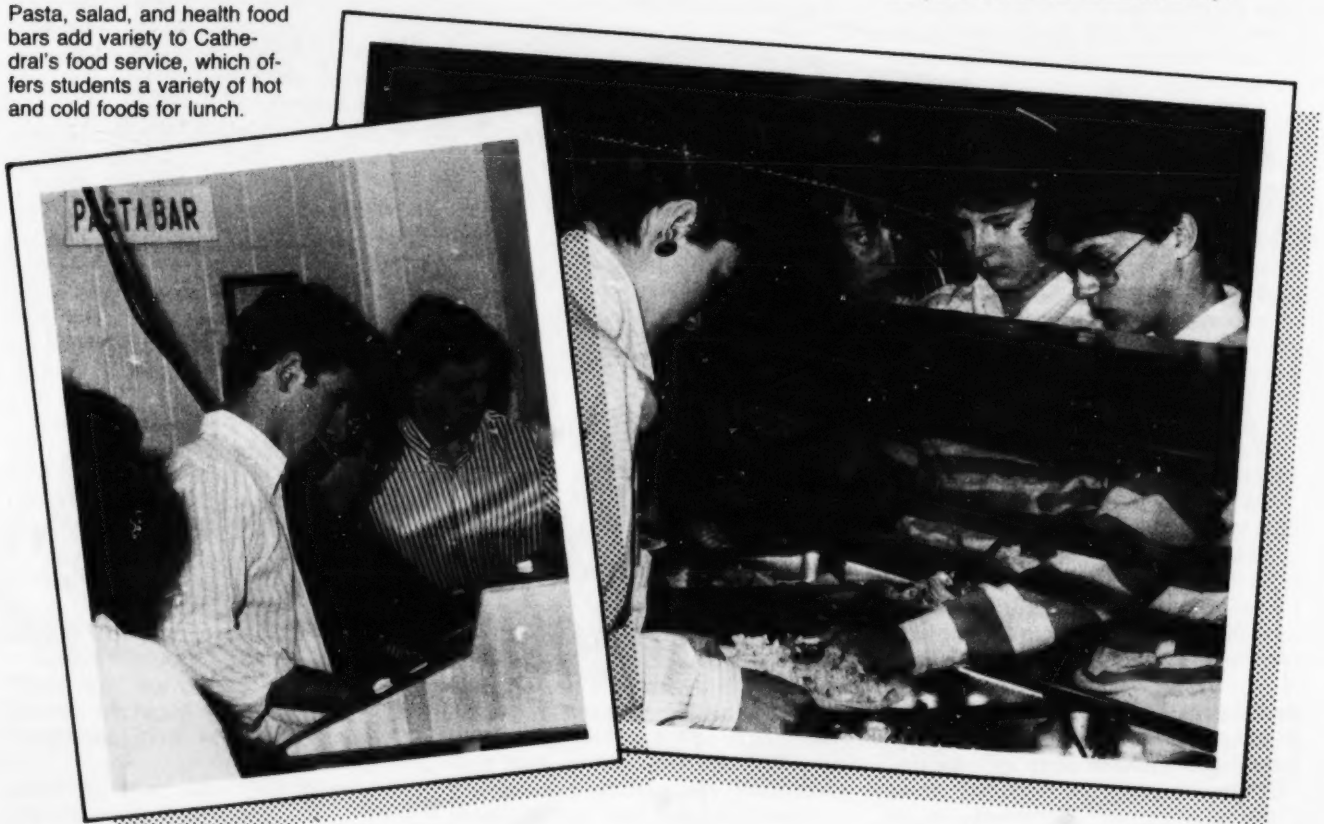
Students offered variety of choices

"If it's meatloaf, it must be Tuesday," could have been true under the once-traditional cycle menu which Ziter believes is unnecessary and monotonous. Instead of using a fixed and recurring menu, she plans a month's meals with an eye on seasonal purchases, available commodities, and special events.

To satisfy as many tastes as possible, the Cathedral School dining room has four different serving lines. In addition to a standard hot meal, there is a fast food line that features such entrees as hamburgers, hot dogs, cold cut grinders (the New England term for subs), and roast beef and grilled cheese sandwiches. Other options are the salad bar and, on alternating weeks, the pasta or health food bar.

On a typical day recently, students could choose from nine different meals that met the USDA meal pattern, or they could buy items a la carte. The lines moved swiftly, giving diners more time to enjoy their meals in the light and surprisingly quiet dining room.

Sixty-three percent of the students buying lunch chose the USDA meal. Counting those who purchased a la carte items, the kitchen served around 90 percent of the student body.



Pasta, salad, and health food bars add variety to Cathedral's food service, which offers students a variety of hot and cold foods for lunch.

Menus for the month are posted in each home room. "We want students to be aware of the variety of choices they have," says Ziter. "We encourage their ideas, too. Recently, we offered parmesan chicken at the suggestion of a student. When we introduce a new item, the cooks always go out and ask students how they like it.

"Very few people choose the same line every day. Some of the girls who want to lose weight choose salads frequently, and sometimes the coach recommends a light meal for boys who have athletic practice right after lunch. These extra options keep our participation high."

The pasta bar, introduced 2 years ago, is a favorite choice of many students. Typical entrees served from the hot food cart include macaroni or spaghetti, which students can top with meat or spicy tomato sauce.

The pasta bar is offered only every other week because of the work involved in cooking fresh pasta. Because the timing is precise and the pasta is not overcooked, any leftovers can be used the following day in the salad bar.

Commodities help hold costs down

Federal cash and commodity assistance allow Ziter to offer lunches to students at a low cost of 75 cents.

"Commodities help us hold costs down," Ziter says, offering an example from a lunch recently served from the pasta bar. "The pasta, ground beef-and-tomato sauce, cheese sticks, salad dressing, and dinner rolls were all or in part donated."

A number of foods used for the pasta bar are processed under contract, using donated ingredients such as cheese, oil, and flour. Some of the processed items occasionally used to add variety to the pasta bar are tortellini, manicotti, lasagna, ravioli, and macaroni or shells with cheese.

Commodities help with other menus as well. Recent salad bar selections included pork salad from donated canned meat, macaroni salad, commodity cheese and peanuts, and salad dressing made with donated oil.

"We plan our menus to take advantage of the commodities available," Ziter says. "The government helps us use less familiar items by supplying recipes and information on the number of servings in a package or carton. We ordered donated figs for the first time recently, and the accompanying recipe for a fig bar cookie was well accepted.

"By saving in one area, we can absorb higher costs in another. For instance, we can buy more expensive items such as fruits and vegetables in season and even occasionally include a luxury item, such as strawberry shortcake, which the senior class asked for recently."

Students encouraged to become involved

Ziter enjoys involving the students in decisions about food. "It's good public relations," she says.

"Each year, senior class officers plan a week's menu. Usually, they choose favorite items from those we have been serving, although they also suggest new things. If we know ahead of time, we can budget for a few more expensive items.

"We also work with the home economics classes in bachelor living, and those students have to budget as well as plan the meals. When they visited our kitchen, many were surprised to find that most foods are prepared here."

In addition to noonday meals, the food service staff offers Cathedral students a breakfast bar. They also cater such school events as dances, parent orientation days in the fall, and an annual father-daughter banquet.

During Frances Ziter's 9 years as director, the school food program at Cathedral has changed greatly.

"Years ago," she says, "the serving area was set up so that workers faced the wall as they ladled lunch onto each tray. Students picked up the filled trays from the end of a conveyor belt.

"Now, under the offer versus serve policy, students make their own choices and may omit one or two of the five items offered. They get to know by name the food service workers who are assigned to the same duty stations each day. It's friendlier and more personal. Daily contact also helps us respond to student tastes."

Always looking for new ideas

Keeping in contact with other food service directors is also important to Ziter. "I always keep my eyes open for new ideas," she says.

"A few years ago, several of the other local food service directors and I formed a group we called 'kitchens in training,' which met each month to share ideas. We learned as much from each other as from the speakers who addressed our meetings.

"I regularly attend meetings sponsored by the state and by the Massachusetts School Food Service Association, because I am always looking for ways to adapt creatively to change."

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